# THE WORKADAY WOMAN

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VIOLET HUNT

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# THE WORK-ADAY WOMAN

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By VIOLET HUNT

AUTHOR OF "THE CELEBRITY AT HOME,"
"SOONER OR LATER," ETC.

LONDON

T. WERNER LAURIE

CLIFFORD'S INN

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DEDICATED

TO

BARRY PAIN

# THE WORKADAY WOMAN

## CHAPTER I

It was the last day of the old year. The day had been strangely quiet, quiet airs, quiet skies, quiet streets, but that was because the eve of the feast fell on a Saturday. Quiet people too, for I think that about this time a sort of remorseful tenderness comes over the bullies and the nagsters, so that they go about gently and deprecatingly, hoping by one day's record sweetness to outface the year's blusterings. One sees crusty old gentlemen bestowing pennies on non-begging children, sour old maids tipping favoured crossing sweepers, and the children themselves playing quietly, hushed by the unusual sense of imminence that a purely arbitrary chronological arrangement, skilfully manipulated, can give.

To me, the closed shop-fronts had a chaste air of withdrawal, the public-house doors swung to on their victims with a modified fervour. On the

road that led past them the mild mud lay in ruts, and the pavements neither ran with rain nor glistered with frost, as I issued from the door of the house I lived in and fared along some sombre back streets to post Lady Violet Barnes' letters and my own. Mine were real letters, hers were chiefly seasonable wishes. She considered simply decorated cards to be "such a nice way of not neglecting people," and so I yearly ordered at her stationers a quietly embossed and coloured variety of printed aspirations for her friends' welfare, addressed them, and posted them, and the recipients, let us hope, were duly assuaged. Carrying five particular examples, a few belated ones that constituted a kind afterthought of Lady Violet's, I sought the nearest pillar-box, whose familiar crimson bulk has become part of my dreams.

The blessed post! To Lady Violet Barnes, a Londoner, a widow, it represents a mere casualty of the day, a bore.

To Caroline Courtenay, her poor relation and hired companion—an event, a porthole opened on the world.

I am ashamed of the avidity with which my ringless, chapped fingers lick the letter off the salver that Staples, the tall, the much-bestreamered, the magnificently efficient, brings in so negligently, My mistress hardly cares to take the trouble of sweeping up the monogrammed envelopes with her knotted and gnarled claws. Yet she deeply

resents my reception of such poor correspondence as falls to me. My letters are scanty enough, goodness knows! I have only one relation in the world, my brother Perronet, and he is a sad rolling stone, so that one never knows beforehand what postmark his letters will bear. I believed him, on this particular New Year's Eve, to be in America. There is Mrs Iver Leadham, in whose family I was governess till her daughters grew up, but she never forgets me; and Lady Violet is a little jealous, for Mrs Iver Leadham is a person of some consequence, and so far has not profited by her intimacy with me to inaugurate an acquaintance with my present employer. Then there is Jehane Bruce, a worker like myself. She is one of those women who ought to have been a man—a well-known and puzzling breed. She lives alone in a flat, and pays its rent and supports herself on regular journalism and occasional fiction. Indeed, Lady Violet, seeing the name of Jehane Bruce in the fatuous journal she takes in week by week, printed large over a successful shocking serial, took it into her head that she would like to be able to say that she knew the author of it, and made me send a card for one of her lesser At Homes to my interesting friend. Miss Jehane Bruce girded up her loins—*i.e.*, laced her boots carefully, which she would not have done for every one, as she said afterwards—and came.

Jehane is a handsome, strong brunette of twenty-eight years of age, with strange, wide blue eyes set in

a dusky face, and hair that would be lovely if she had only time to attend to it. It looks at present as if all the flues of Bloomsbury had wafted their smoke into its meshes. She has a magnificent figure, and takes stock-size. So her clothes are fairly well made, but they soon give way under undue strain and gusts of sudden pressure, while "trade-spots" (Jehane calls them that, but I call them pudding- or ink-ditto) have a fatal habit of settling on the front breadth of her skirts. Her boots are never cleaned; she says it is hardly worth while, as she is sure to muddy them afresh every day, and her hard-worked slavey endorses these convenient views with rapture.

So when Jehane arrived early, and sent in her card, informally, before her by the disgusted Staples, I was fairly prepared for any appearance she might present. I had said nothing, on mature consideration, to Lady Violet, for after all, though I dreaded it, it was not an absolute certainty that Jehane's bodice and skirt would not be on terms, and her flapping side pocket, crammed with what she liked to call type-written *communiqués*, openly inviting inspection! Both these lesions in the scheme of perfect neatness, however, existed, plus a vagrant chemisette that refused to remain anchored to its moorings at her waist in spite of the pins with which it was studded.

Lady Violet's well-known short-sightedness is never available for the deficiencies and derelictions of others, but has a wonderful way of coming up

to time when poor human nature is most in fault. Of course she noticed it all. I could not manage to give Jehane a hint to restore order until another caller arrived and my literary friend was turned over to me.

"Oh, my frontlet! I never manage to put in enough tent-pins, somehow. Thanks, very much," she exclaimed easily, tugging with artistic futility at her random attire and producing but a botched-up and tottering cohesion.

Lady Violet said never another word to the poor girl during the whole course of her visit, but left her severely to me. She could and would say for the future that the authoress of *Rag, Tag, and Bobtail* had been in her house, but that "the result had been unsatisfactory, somehow—she did not believe in mixing"! Jehane's mission in Dampier Square was over.

She is the best-tempered woman in the world, and it would be difficult to impress upon her the fact that she had been snubbed. It was I who objected to Lady Violet's rudeness on my friend's account. For myself, I think I shall never feel this particular pang again. There are not many tender spots left in me: my sensibilities are encysted in dullness, atrophied by the simplicity of my life. I am patient, colourless, imperturbable enough for my employer to say of me when she wants, for a change, to say something civil, but not unduly elating: "Upon my word, Caroline, you were cut out by nature for a companion!"

To-day, when I had posted the pieces of extra double-milled paper that prevented Lady Violet's friends from feeling the sharpness of the serpent's tooth, and purchased two shillings worth of penny stamps and sixpenny worth of halfpenny stamps and a packet of thin post-cards, and had patiently allowed Lady Violet's dog to yap her little fill at the only two tradesmen's carts that broke the peace of this afternoon of rest, I turned my face homeward. I wished to attain as soon as might be Lady Violet's boudoir and a detestable volume of memoirs, whose only merit appeared to be that my mistress was distantly connected with the senile author of them, a nonagenarian countess, who even in her best days had never been witty. Lady Violet had bidden me make a fuss for her book at Mudie's—"One must support one's own class, you know, Caroline!"

Although I am never allowed to forget that I am well over thirty, I may not have a latch-key. Staples, the parlour-maid, has one. Staples, summoned from her voluptuous tea, and licking her disdainful lips, opened the door to me. We keep three. Lady Violet has no official maid, but "does" with me and Staples. Her fine wig, lightly touched with grey, is my charge; and sometimes, when the blood rises in spring and provokes to high-spirited deeds of daring, I shake my fist at it as it reposes tranquilly on its block, waiting for my ministrations. A *masseuse* attends weekly to my mistress's knees and her hands; a

dressmaker calls periodically, and fits her with a new dress. I sleep in a little bedroom that adjoins hers, so that her lightest snore can come to my ears. It does.

Lady Violet's father was the Earl of Permaine, her husband—a commoner—died twelve years ago. She never had a child. She likes the other sex, and thinks that a really fine man can do no wrong. I have no reason to suppose that she ever seriously contemplated re-marriage, and it is to the credit of the men generally, that she is not invited to do so, for she has money and "is a pretty good flirt," as another friend of mine, Margot Bligh, says. There is more than a suspicion of temperamental miserliness about her, but, on the whole, she stumps up nobly for charities, and shows a disposition to save pennies rather than pounds. Of two qualities of goods or materials she always chooses the best. She is not really, as that forgiving Jehane remarked, at all a bad sort; she is only a cold, chill, absolutely unlovable person. She carps, she contradicts, she is witty at anybody's expense but her own, she carefully stunts all aspiration and endeavour towards the higher life in others. She is a "damp woman," and lives in a "damper" square—to quote my friend Jehane,—"shockingly rheumatic," she says herself. Indeed, she has not, nor ever has had, any physical advantages whatever, except, perhaps, the low, thrilling, resonant voice in which she says disagreeable things.

I went upstairs quietly, and doffed my outdoor clothes. It is absolutely forbidden me to enter into The Presence with the chill of the outside clinging to my garments. I have to take off my boots in the little entry below the staircase to save the stair carpet. I may not use scent. I may not do my hair "big." I may not wear a jingling chatelaine, or dresses trimmed with beads or buttons, for they are apt to scrape and spoil the leather chairs in the dining-room. I have at last mastered the secret of companionable clothes, which need not be either pretty or attractive, but must look "good," the hardest quality of all to compass on forty-five pounds a year.

Before descending I sat down and wrote a few words in a book. I had no business to do it. It is my one vice. That Lady Violet was probably fuming in the drawing-room over my prolonged absence only added zest to the performance.

I scribble a little every day. One never knows: it may all come in some time. I write down my own adventures, if I have any — my friends' adventures when they recount them to me. I dish them up in the form of short stories, which, of course, I shall never publish. It amuses me, and does no harm to anybody.

Still, I dared not keep Lady Violet waiting very long. She had probably heard the front door bell ring; she always listens for that in the most irritating way. I put away my writing materials, and went downstairs defiantly. I opened the

drawing-room door so that it never thought of jarring or squeaking—a carefully acquired art of my own—and went up to Lady Violet, who sat with the expected shade of annoyance on her face. As a matter of fact, it comes there often enough, without obvious cause. I sometimes think that this peevish expression means that poor Lady Violet is incubating some tiresome internal complaint. I have often noticed this symptom in people who have sickened afterwards. But there was no doubt about it to-day, it was the fault of my dear diary.

I spoke softly, and pacified her as usual; told her my little obvious tale of Fidgie's dangers and the butchers' carts, handed her the post-cards and the stamps, and accounted scrupulously for the three and six. Lady Violet trusts nobody, least of all me. If a sovereign is lost, I am under suspicion till it turns up under the sofa cushion, or in Fidgie's basket. I don't care. Nothing of that kind matters. I took this post of companion to my distant cousin, Lady Violet Barnes, of my own free will when it was offered me. I did not know shorthand or typewriting or any of the arts that fit a woman for the more jaunty career of offices, and the opportunity of interchange of ideas with her fellow-clerks of either sex, coupled with that chance of the reversion of the more than professional interest of the male head of the establishment, which looms, a divine possibility, in the heated imaginations of the young ladies who assist

him. My brother, the only responsible relation I have in the world, considers my position the only suitable one to a young woman of quite decent family, as I in the main am. Lady Violet chaperons me.

"Is it cold out?" Lady Violet enquired.

"No, delightfully warm!"

"You mean smothery and oppressive. I don't approve of unseasonable weather. Well, now you are in at last, why doesn't Staples bring tea?"

I did not say, "Because she has not finished her own." I prefer to stand well with Staples, who is a power in the land, so I merely replied: "Because it isn't quite tea-time."

"Please don't be impertinent, Caroline. Then may we have a bit of the dear Countess's Memoirs?"

"Certainly; ten minutes of them."

"Not worth while beginning. You may talk to me."

That is the hardest part of my task. Sooner than wearily plough my way to the centre of Lady Violet's intelligence in moods such as this, baulked by her deafness, that she concentrates carefully to a point, I think, on purpose to baffle me, I would thankfully hoe a whole garden full of potatoes. I began:

"Were you at all disturbed by the cats last night in the Brownriggs' area?"

"I am always disturbed by everything," replied Lady Violet guilelessly, unaware of the vocal

testimony to the contrary that had come to my ears in the course of the night. "Did you go out and stop them?"

"No; but old Brownrigg flung up his window and threw his toothbrush at them, and it pitched on the plate-glass roof with a frightful clatter."

"He flung what he could best spare, I suppose," said Lady Violet, enjoying as usual a cheap shy at her next-door neighbour, as the door opened and let in Staples, not with tea, but a salver. The inclination of her body, and the direction of her eye, warned me that the missive lying thereon was intended for me.

I raised my hand. Lady Violet, with the reproof of my forwardness ready on her tongue, changed it into a cross, "Oh, for you!" The slightly grubby note had been brought by a district messenger, and I had to sign the receipt while Lady Violet sat by, chafing at the interruption, and at the fact of such important machinery being set in motion for a mere paid companion. The note was from Jehane Bruce, and ran:

"DEAR OLD GIRL — (In haste). — Expensive messenger, all in the hopes of getting you. You will please come to my sty to-night as ever is. Some jolly people are coming, got up chiefly by telegram. Pity your old woman isn't on!" (I scruffled the letter up in my hand and glanced instinctively at Lady Violet, who was regarding me with a cold basilisk eye.) "If you were really kind, you would appear early and help me cut

sandwiches. Mariuscha, my new neighbour at No. 25, is purely ornamental, so may I count on you, 8.30?—Your grateful in advance,

JEHANE."

We dine at 7.30. "Out of the question!" I muttered, folding up the letter.

"What is out of the question?" asked Lady Violet eagerly.

I told her.

"I suppose you said that out loud so as to get me to ask," Lady Violet said, "and to make me out a dragon! Do you want to go to this thing?"

"Not particularly," I answered, "playing" her. "You see, Miss Bruce lives at the very top of some mansions in Bloomsbury, and there is no lift, and she has all Bohemia let loose at her parties."

"And do you disdain Bohemia?" asked my employer, as who should say, this upstart wants to lift herself above her native mud. She went on in her own domineering manner: "Nonsense! you had much better go and see your friends, and enjoy yourself thoroughly, and bring me back some amusing stories. I am not narrow."

In real truth, Bohemia, as I know it, is not nearly improper or wicked enough for the heated imaginations of the Lady Violets of the West End. I mentally engaged to draw upon my imagination freely, if Bohemia failed to come up to the mark,

and gratefully accepted Lady Violet's permission to go and wallow in familiar garbage for the evening, and bring a little of it away for her delectation. Of course I wanted to go. I was very fond of Jehane and some other girls who were sure to be there. I wanted to see Mariuscha, the new ornamental neighbour, and, moreover, I have a strain of Scots blood in me which made me hanker to see the New Year in properly, under any, even the most revoltingly third-rate, circumstances. However Bohemian, Jehane's friends were sure to join hands and sing "Auld Lang Syne" as the clock struck twelve.

Lady Violet had her reading, and we dined earlier, through her excessive and momentary complaisance. She positively hugged the idea of my leaving her to seek my own native depths, and fully meant, herself, to enjoy a lonely evening, for a change, and for purposes of future recrimination: "Caroline left me, positively left me—on the most sacred evening of the whole year—to spend it with some mad aliens." Oh, how well I knew it, but I had counted the cost and found it well worth while! Staples was to give her her drops, and she would go to bed at ten so as to "get off" before twelve, and so pass the great climax in unconsciousness.

The sensation of unaccustomed liberty at night was almost too acute to be delightful as I sallied forth, with a latch-key actually, for once, and made my way to Hardicanute Mansions, Bloomsbury.

It was, as I have said, unusually warm and mild, and perhaps, according to Lady Violet, a trifle "smothery." All the better, we should be able to go out on Jehane's large flat roof and hear the bells nicely. I had on my one black evening dress, with a clean tucker in it, threaded and tied with a narrow black velvet ribbon. It fastened in front: all my things nearly do. I prefer not to have to ask Staples to "do up my back." I had piloted my winter imitation-sealskin jacket carefully over the sleeves and poised my hat very gingerly, so as not to spoil my hair. It was nothing very wonderful, but I had ventured to do it "big" on this occasion. Not having procured a dispensation from Lady Violet, I avoided letting her pass my toilet in review, and bolted out of the house. I had put on my two rings, and the little pearl necklace that my godmother Hamilton left me in her will on condition that I was not to sell it. It is worth a good deal, and looks it. Lady Violet does not allow me to wear it when on duty; she says that it suggests impropriety worn by a woman in my position. That is just what I rather like; one is apt to have these fancies, however respectable one is.

I was as wildly excited as if I were going to meet my fate; but, as a matter of fact, I was not, but those of my girl friends instead, to whom, however, I will give as much place in this tale as to myself. I am too retiring a disposition to be my own heroine.

## CHAPTER II

JEHANE BRUCE, actually flourishing a duster, met me at the door of her flat, whereon was nailed her cheaply-printed visiting-card. The milkman had left the tokens of his professional attention on the door-mat, which looked as if Jehane's chow had been working for days to carry it away bodily. But with my friend charity and sweeping began at home; her jurisdiction distinctly ended on the threshold, and the duster stood only, as it were, for the banner of hospitality. She was much excited, and pointed wildly to the further flight of grey macadamised stair that led on to the roof. The trap-door that terminated it was open.

"I am afraid it is too misty for stars!" she exclaimed; "but isn't it warm and lovely for September — December, I mean? We can all swarm up there presently to hear the wild bells. So sweet of you, Carrie, to come early! There's a railing all round. You can't fall unless you want to. Not that working women ever pine to commit suicide, do they? I have got some really jolly men coming to-night—idlers all! One

of them, Herbert Langshire, is quite millionairish. I met him on a Kindness to Animals Committee that I was reporting. Awfully smart people go in for those horse ambulances, do you know, and take stray cats to their bosoms. Then Casimir Livingston — he is an engineer, I believe, but could live without doing anything, easily. Funny, isn't it, in our set, how the women who work entertain the men who don't?"

"Millionaires work at managing a lot of money, don't they?"

"That is not quite the same thing as sweating at making a very little of it, is it? And oh, your brother's coming."

"Perry! Well, he doesn't work at either. I often wonder how he pays for his opulent waxed fronts. I am sure his shirts must cost him at least ten and six, and they weren't got at Faith Brothers! How did you get hold of his address?"

"I didn't get hold of it. I don't know it from Adam. A girl is bringing him."

"Another! Well, I might have known!" said I. "But still, I shall be glad to see him, and any charmer he happens to have got in tow. Look here, can't we go in and begin tidying? Jehane, your hall door-mat wants mending."

"I know. I've tripped up in it five times to-day already. Once with the milk. Reduced that considerably in quantity! I suppose we had better take it away altogether, or we shall have the four idle young men — shall we call them the four

calenders? What are calenders?—breaking their aristocratic shins over it. It isn't often men come up here. Mustn't discourage the gentle, timid creatures. Here goes! Heave it over to Louy. Remove your body, Louy; we want to get in."

The slavey, with a cottage loaf pressed to her heart, was standing in the entrance to receive the mat and listen to our agreeable conversation. She was by way of cutting slices of bread and butter with assiduity.

"For goodness' sake, child, don't cut yourself and 'blug' the loaf!" said her considerate mistress.

"Suppose I undertake the sandwiches?" said I.

"They will be cleaner if you do," said Jehane. "But come and take your things off first. In here. You know the way to my tiring room. The box room—in strict confidence! Wait a jiff. I'll light up. God, what have I put my foot into?"

A ripping, tearing sound was audible. I knew well enough what I had put my head through—a really perfect and well-formed cobweb of long standing, which I wiped patiently away, while Jehane searched for the matches. She found them at last, and cordially invited me to remove my goloshes and "stick up" my hair in about a farthing's worth of looking-glass set up on the drawer tops. Then, adjusted as far as was possible, I issued forth into the *salon*, where I knew, as a matter of fact and congratulation, Jehane habitually slept.

"Problem—where's the bed?" she asked, gaily as usual.

"Everything in the room, pretty nearly, looks as if it might be it," I answered, allowing my gaze to wander round the well-known little apartment that sheltered a brave, hard-working, if slip-shod, girl. It was perfectly full, but absolutely unfurnished. You could not see the landlord's cheap wall-paper for the Turkish hangings; the seats were composed of packing-cases, covered with bazaar and cathedral stuff, dhurries and chasubles and orfreys, built into the semblance of divans. The table, which was not a table, was covered with a gorgeous Syrian table-cover of no particular value. The floor was stained some irregular dark shade, like the Nut Brown Maid's complexion, and many rugs, chivied by the devious feet of the day's visitors, had collected shuddering in the corners. Jehane recovered them and spread them out. I held my breath for fear of germs.

"And so you really sleep in your sitting-room, Jehane? I must say I think it a very unhealthy practice."

"I daresay it would be for most people," replied my friend serenely, "but I am so absolutely antiseptic, you see. Oh, don't sit in that chair! It is feeling bad; I have noticed it. Don't sit anywhere, but let us come along and see what Louy is about—that is, if you think the lighting is all right?"

There were Chinese lanterns and fairy lights,

and night-lights and wicks floating in jam-pots full of oil. The smell was faintly religious, assisted by the incense which Jehane had been burning. I dismissed the subject of lighting, saying, "We are all old enough to be grateful for small mercies in the way of light," and passed into the kitchen, where Louy, having cut a few dozen jaw-splitting sandwiches, had turned her attention to the glasses, which she was rubbing up previous to their reception of her mistress's own personal mixture. Jehane called her punch "Hell Broth," and brewed it from a special, heady, inflammatory recipe of her grandmother's. "It is well to have the old-fashioned kind of grandmother," she always said, "and trot her out when necessary."

"May I wipe the glasses?" said I, hastily sacrificing a clean pocket-handkerchief in the interests of civilisation.

"Yes, please do; and, Louy——"

"Yes, miss?"

"Something's smelling in the *salon*."

Louy's face betrayed a conviction that such a circumstance was not of unusual occurrence, but volunteered, in her own vernacular, to go and see "what was up."

"No matter!" said Jehane, arresting her; "leave it alone, and it will come home—I mean, pass off. Now arrange the sandwiches on the Spode dish. Get it down, and mind not to take it by the cracked side. See it's clean first, Louy."

"It's clean, miss," said Louy, reaching it down

from the shelf and wetting her finger in her mouth, previously to passing it tenderly over the plate; "leastways, now it is."

"Oh, Louy, you pig!" remarked her mistress complacently. She then changed the subject, observing: "I say, Carrie, you know Mariuscha offered to lend me her room downstairs to overflow into, but I refused—breaks up the party rather, don't you think?"

"Oh yes, it does. Why is she called Mariuscha?"

"Her name is Mary Anna Lancaster. Once she went on a visit to Russia. I am not sure her father hadn't a speck of Russian blood. Her flat is the one just below me. Her mother and sister have one in the next block."

"What a funny arrangement!"

"Well, they were all ruined some time ago, before they came here. Argentines, I think, and then the father died. And they each had a hundred a year out of the wreck."

"But why don't they pool their incomes?"

"Don't know. Mariuscha's flat is nicer than theirs, though she's only one. She likes her freedom, I suppose. The younger sister—Michelle—undertakes the old mother and does all the being domestic. And——"

"And what?"

"Well, one doesn't altogether like to drop on a pal, but there's something slightly queer about it—although I am quite sure it is quite all right. An old gentleman——"

"They are the worst."

"Oh, you mistake me—not that sort of old gentleman at all, but an innocent old crank, more, don't you know? She goes to stay with him down at his place in the country, and at his house in town. He takes her to the theatres and buys her pretty frocks and fans, and runs her generally."

"I don't see what more he could do."

"Yes, but I'm forgetting to tell you that there's a wife about—or was—I seem to think I saw something in the papers about her dying a short while ago? I wonder? And I am not sure that Mush' stays with him any more; her death would stop it. But you know that Mush' never explains. She's a bit of a dark horse, and always will be; it's her style."

"Goes with her dark and stormy beauty, I suppose?"

"How on earth did you guess that Mariuscha was dark? Yes, her hair is as black as a crow. Her face is pale—mat-white, like magnolia or pure white Castile soap. She always makes me think of a Sonia or a Vera—some revolutionary heroine of sorts. Bit selfish, though, and they aren't."

"Is she clever?"

"Not particularly, I should think, but writes a beautiful hand. She is sec.' to an M.P. for an hour or so every day. Of course, there's a scandal about that. Mariuscha just lets 'em talk—not

much originality or initiative about her, don't you know. She just dresses beautifully and smokes all day like a furnace and there it is. I say, shut up! Here she comes."

Mariuscha, who came drifting in, with a black lace shawl wrapped mantilla-wise over her head, was very tall and stately, with a cold blue eye and a splendid walk and figure. The first thing she said after "How do you do?" was "Have you got a light?"

The matches were lost again. I found them, and we took up our positions in the *salon*. The party had begun.

I noticed that Mariuscha sat down in a position that fully demonstrated her extremely pleasing length of limb. She was wise. I, personally, did not think her attitude quite nice, but still I reserved judgment until some men should come in and then I should notice whether she modified or accentuated it.

"Mich' asked me to tell you," Mariuscha said, "that she hoped to come in presently, after she has seen mother to bed."

"Oh, I *am* glad!" exclaimed the good Jehane. "I always want Mich' to have some fun. She looks ill and below par, I think."

"I haven't noticed," said Mush' gently, smoking away.

"It is such a pity Mich' doesn't smoke," continued Jehane; "it might soothe her."

"Yes, but mother wouldn't like it. Mich' can't

do any of those things. Do I hear some of your guests paddling about on the roof, Jehane?"

"Oh, stop them! Collar them!" cried our hostess, jumping up and rushing to the door. "It would be most disillusioning for them to go up now. Take away the romance of seeing the New Year in altogether! Here, Mr—Mr—I am sure I don't know which one of you it is! But, anyhow, stop—come off that roof!"

She disappeared, and we heard her outside scrambling on the ceiling, as it were; presently she returned with two embarrassed specimens of the other sex.

"I found them coyly embracing chimney-stacks, poor dears!" she explained, out of breath. "Here—let me introduce Mr Herbert Langshire—Miss Lancaster — Miss Courtenay. Mr Peronnet Courtenay—Miss Courtenay——"

She stopped, laughing. It was my own brother. "What are you doing in London, Perry?" I asked him.

"Nothing!" answered Perry with absolute truthfulness. He had nothing more to say to his sister, but pursued Jehane with a matter of some urgency.

"I say, Miss Bruce, Miss Cresswell"—he mentioned a name heretofore unknown to me—"Miss Cresswell is getting her breath at the bottom of your stairs, and wanted me to go back for her."

"Then go back for her," said Jehane shortly, and we all stood waiting for the exceedingly

effective entry of a pretty, shrinking creature in blue, with a large tulle bow at the back of her neck. Oh, how I know those bows—it is always the same kind of woman who wears them!

While she was being introduced to Herbert Langshire, Perry whispered ribald remarks to me.

"Say, isn't he like a Herbert? Herberts are always rich and smug. Carrie, a word in your ear! Do contrive to take poor, dear Desdemona to tidy her hair. I promised her you would be a mother to her."

"Perry dear, she is surely older than me. Still, I will. Did *you* untidy it in the cab? And are you sure she doesn't like it like that?"

"Anyway, a proper human girl likes to have the chance of looking at herself in the glass before she affronts millionaires, and what not," Perry retorted. "I speak who know. That is just why women adore me, because I have not a mind above those little details."

"Who is she?"

"Nobody—same as I always contrive to pick up. I seem to have a constitutional disability to collect women who will be of any use to me in my career. So I have chucked a career. I mean to love nice women all my life, and spend my little all of wits on them. Now, I see there's a diversion—take her."

Miss Desdemona Cresswell was very pleasant to me in the box room where I led her, and tried to do its barren honours.

"Fancy my bringing your own brother here to

meet you!" said she, dabbing her face with a powder-puff that came mysteriously out of a bunch of artificial violets she wore on the front of her gown. "What a perfect dear he is!"

"Yes; everybody finds him so."

"Oh, not everybody, surely, not ordinary people don't, do they?" she said deprecatingly, and I took a liking to Desdemona from that moment. I *do* like women who are guileless enough to translate their first thought into words, it is quite uncatlike to be transparent.

"Oh, my hair!" she went on. "How ever will I get it anything like in this glass? Doesn't Miss Bruce *ever* want to look nice?"

"I'll hold up the glass for you, to get a tilt."

"Thank you. Oh, these chiffon bows! What a bother they are! You *are* kind and thoughtful—just like Perry! You know, of course, that we are very intimate—call each other by our Christian names?"

"Of course you do," said I, with a largeness of manner that disconcerted her. I supposed she was anxious to tell me that she considered herself engaged to Perry, and I did not want to be forced to impart to her what I knew of my brother's views of the state of betrothal. We returned to the *salon* just as Margot Bligh was getting in past Louy, who thought it great fun showing people in, and opposing a prominent part of her person to their free entry. However, everybody knew Louy, and Margot did not allow her to interfere with the

impressiveness of her appearance in a coat-like sort of garment with angel sleeves, which I knew of old, and did not consider suited well with her determined little face. Jehane introduced her formally as Miss Margaret Bligh. She was careless—the storm burst, as I knew it would:

"*Margot*, dear—do you mind? I am in the Academy Catalogue as Margot, last year, with 'Crabbed Age and Youth.'"

"No, I don't mind a bit," answered Jehane easily; "Margot, May, or Maggie, it's all the same to Jenny. My own name is really Jane, too, as it happens. I say, did you sell 'Crabbed Youth and Age'?"

Margot patiently corrected her misreading of the title, and went on; "No, not yet, and it's an awful shame, considering I am the gold medallist of 99! It is all jealousy, you know——"

"Here, tell Mr Langshire all about your woes!" said Jehane, foisting her off in view of a newcomer who was at that moment blocking the doorway. A certain look in her kind friend's eyes warned Margot of Langshire's millionairishness, and in a very few moments I heard her telling him all about "Crabbed Age and Youth" that so sadly hung fire and adorned the walls of Laburnam Cottage, Bayswater, instead of some one's picture gallery. I saw her card come readily out of her pocket, and the man called Langshire blush and say he would call on Sunday week without fail. This arrangement completed, to Margot's intense and

visible satisfaction—she looked like a mother who has just married a daughter off—I noticed he contrived to devote himself to Mariuscha, who was by far the prettiest woman there and the most disdainful. *Her* card was not always popping in and out of her pocket; in her case it was the man who would beg the woman to let him call and her cold permission would but serve to inflame his desire to put on an uncomfortable frock-coat and a tall hat and go and sit half an hour in a toy flat like a pill-box at the feet of a haughty divinity. If Mariuscha had had a picture to sell it would have gone off like hot rolls. That is always the way.

I got into conversation with Mrs Coles, a lazy, frivolous woman of business connections who likes to live in Bohemia—sooner than be socially ostracised by her betters. People abuse her, mock her, chaff her, and say that "she is too silly about her children," but they go to her "lovely parties" at her house in West Kensington, where one meets everybody, without exception, to whom exception could possibly be taken. She divulged to me the secret of the success of these entertainments.

"I just go round asking everybody nice that I meet. I always have a card or two with me; I'll give one to you. I have no shame about asking celebrities; it can do no harm to ask them, and if they are stuck up and don't come, I am none the worse, and I can always say: 'It's a pity that

poor So-and-so suffers from swelled head.' Lots of people would sooner come than have *that* said of them. In the end they *do* honour me, even the most haughty of them. There was Bully Broughton, the backwoods man, I just battered him with invitations. At last I put on the back of one of my cards: '*Must* you snub me a thirteenth time?—so unlucky!' and that melted him, and he came, and I have never given an At Home without him, since."

"He enjoyed himself?"

"He knows one thing that at my house he will meet no frumps or frowsts, but jolly people who have done something, even if it is something bad. Sin magnificently, says Peer Gynt. They are famous enough, but perhaps they are not admitted to his clubs, or his wife won't have them in the house. *I* don't care. I ask everybody, if only they are clever and amuse me. Genius must not be bound by conventional rules, must it? It is a law unto itself: restraint would cramp or kill it. I feel very strongly on that point. I ask pretty girls, too. I am not afraid of them. Margot Bligh—you know her?—is a capital draw. I never could have that funny old mother of hers, though."

"Mrs Bligh is a handsome old lady."

"Yes; and Margot dresses her quite nicely, for the house. But the old are just blots on tea-parties. Margot quite agrees with me. I wonder if she will make anything of Herbert Langshire? He has a house in Hans Place, and is furnishing

it slowly and solemnly. He is Mrs Iver Leadham's brother."

"Oh, of course he is!" I exclaimed at once, recognising the connection with my old employer.

"Why, do you know him? I must get you to introduce me. Jehane seems to have forgotten to."

"I have never spoken to him in my life," said I, moving hastily away. A move was being made for the roof, and I wanted to attach myself to Mariuscha's shy sister, who had come in, and who struck me as a pale, washed-out likeness of Mariuscha, soft, deprecating, and attractive — to me. But she explained that she could not stay to see the New Year in, but must go back to her mother.

"But why, Mich'?" clamoured Jehane. "Isn't your mother asleep long ago? Need she leave us, Mariuscha? It is too bad."

"Mother might wake up and be frightened, and, anyhow, she would loathe hearing the bells all alone," Mariuscha said in clear, chilling tones.

"You see, Mush' says I ought to go," said Mich'. "Good night, all! I say, Mush'"—in a whisper—"I see you have torn your skirt. Bring it round on Sunday and I will mend it."

"All right, I won't forget," answered Mariuscha, without taking her cigarette out of her mouth, and her blue eyes fixed on a new arrival with a certain unusual intentness.

"Well, Mich' dear, if you must go, you must,"

said Jehane; "but I think it is a shame. Taste the Hell Broth before you go, anyway."

"It would go straight to my head."

"Poor Mich' has an absurdly weak head," added Mariuscha. "Well, good night, old girl! I feel sure mother has wakened up!"

The shy, little bullied thing departed. Perry saw her downstairs, somewhat to the disgust of Miss Cresswell. Perry, however, never allows one woman to make him neglectful of another. He came back in time to fling a rainbow scarf of chiffon over Desdemona's shoulders; indeed, he wanted to fling soft scarves over all the women's shoulders, but was forestalled in many cases. The gentle, charming, high-collared young man who had arrived last tried very hard to perform this office for Mariuscha, to whom he had only just been introduced. She, however, refused to cover her head at all.

"I never take cold," she told him icily, unprovocatively.

The young man looked at her. I know that look, disapproving but fascinated. He was Mariuscha's slave from that moment.

## CHAPTER III

HERBERT LANGSHIRE had also loosely evolved thoughts of annexing Mariuscha for the voyage on to the roof, but he was shy, and Miss Bligh threw herself on his mercy, so he perforce escorted her to a safe corner on the vast dark plateau, dotted with other and alien waiting groups, for it was at the disposition of all the happy residents of Hardicanute Mansions. I had to resign myself to go up with Mrs Coles, who stuck to me—took me under her wing, as she would have called it. Why in this world is it always the people one does not take to who freeze on to one?

"Mind the blacks!" begged Jehane. "It is the only drawback to this lovely roof. Don't lean on anything!"

"Except me!" said my brother. "My black doesn't come off, I can assure you."

I have heard people hint that Perry is forward, fast, and vulgar. The people who say so are those to whom he has not permitted himself to say things of this sort. They certainly resent his impertinence to others. I cannot see it myself; I am very fond of Perry, though he is not the

slightest use to me as a brother. His ingenuous face and champion-of-all-women style effectually discounts the *risqué* speeches he sometimes does permit himself. Perry has a great success in many and various circles. His well-bred Bohemianism interests people. He cleverly makes the best of both worlds, and works them to his profit. Countesses have him at their country houses, and get him to arrange their theatricals for them. Peers with yachts ask him to sail their expensive toy to and fro for them from Bembridge to Cowes. He is a capital shot, and shoots parvenus' pheasants for them. He escorts pretty schoolgirls back to keep their terms at Brighton or Folkestone with the full confidence of their mothers, who are pleased to treat him as a boy, though Perry is thirty. He has kept his curly hair.

Miss Cresswell made much out of the brief passage from garret to roof, clinging to my brother, doing her best to incur chimney-stacks, stumbling over leaden groins where no groins were.

"I am afraid I am a horrid nuisance," she kept repeating, and Perry answering: "Not at all, I like your pretty whimpering!" Any other woman would have stopped dead at that!

Mariuscha, who was a good deal taller than either of her attendant squires, made no demands on them. "You know this is my roof, too," she said. "I could find my way all over it in the darkest dark!"

For it was not really dark. The glow from the

public-house on one side reflected a pale watery radiance on the leads, and the lights of London, which even to this day I am apt to consider fearfully as the evidence of some great city conflagration, irradiated the sky all round. Only by going to the edge of the platform, however, could one see the light; the middle of it was so dark that our figures and faces were indistinguishable. There was, of course, no moon on such a damp night. In the dimness, the uncovered shoulders of Mariuscha seemed positively to shine. She was standing as far away from any supporting chimney-stack as might be, and her flesh looked cold. She was the only one of us with uncovered shoulders. Suddenly she threw down her newly-begun cigarette; it was the outward manifestation of a subterranean fit of temper, I think. It lay there smoking red, and Jehane screamed: "For goodness' sake, Mush', don't set the place on fire!"

We all laughed. Though a beautiful rich young man was standing near her, devouring her with his eyes, Mariuscha's thoughts were a long way off that roof. She had her hand on one of the pendants of a necklace she wore—emeralds, I think—and I was sure that it was connected with her pensive fit and her previous outburst of temper. I did not think the necklace could really be composed of emeralds: it would have been so much too valuable to be possessed by a girl in her position, and I nudged Perry quietly and asked

him if he had any idea what the necklace was composed of.

"Emeralds. Antique, but A1," said Perry shortly. He was not interested in that sort of girl at all, and he went back to Desdemona. Herbert Langshire, who, I observed, was very weak if gentlemanly, left Mariuscha's side in response to a clumsily provocative movement from Miss Bligh. Mariuscha made no effort to retain him. Neither did she welcome him, when he presently sidled back to her, Miss Bligh's comparatively small supply of magnetism having failed. I watched all these unconscious strategic movements of parties; I had none of my own to conduct, but just stood patiently beside Mrs Coles and Jehane, and listened to them chattering away—good journalese — indeed, Jehane, from the way she talked, might have been engaged to report brightly the advent of the New Year for one of the new Halfpennies. A stale old subject, but she could be counted on to do her best with it. At any rate, she was enjoying herself, and meant us to enjoy ourselves, too. Louy had toiled up "at twice," as she put it, with a small table and glasses for the Hell Broth, and we now stood awkwardly, each with a full beaker of it in our hands, to welcome the momentous striking of the hour. The broad face of Perry's Waterbury gleamed as he held it poised playfully so that all might see it. He made nervous jokes, and laughed at them himself. Perry is a properly con-

stituted young man, and feels emotion in suitable places.

I could not help thinking, as I stood there, waiting for the clock to strike, and loose our tongues and break the tension, how different a world it was from that which would have met in drawing-rooms like Lady Violet's on a parallel occasion. The relations of the sexes here were a little altered. The woman gained character at the expense of the man. Our off-hand, independent manner was, with most of us, a result of a consciousness that these decorous, black-coated figures were less to be regarded in the light of fellow bread-winners than in that of playmates. Except for the inevitable femininity that reared its snake head here and there among us, we women all preserved a careless freedom of pose that had no relevance to the standards set up by the artificial figure-heads of sex whom Jehane had asked to help us to enjoy our party. *We* should have to rise betimes next morning, not they; *we* should insist on paying our cab-fares home, or, supposing our abodes lay near enough to permit of walking and we were persuaded to take their proffered arms, we should not really need them, but would be moved by a pitying politeness to avail ourselves of assistance that impeded.

There was now no noise of cabs rolling hither and thither; their fares were gathered behind closed doors, waiting the supreme moment, with glasses poised and hands ready to fold over that of their

fortuitous neighbour, and their lips attuned to "Auld Lang Syne." All except the rips, the outcasts, the battered at life's feast, to whom anniversaries are not; and the Lady Violets, perhaps, tossing in their downy beds, or enabled artificially to sleep through the trying hour of commemoration.

"What time is it?" asked our Jehane, her honest voice trembling.

"Ten to," answered my brother in equally shaky tones. No one asked me to speak, but I believe I too suffered the influences of the season. Mrs Coles murmured something about Big Babsie and Wee Oneie — her children, presumably. Margot Bligh screwed up a pair of perfectly dry eyes to see how we all "came"? She was an artist before everything.

In five minutes more Jehane cried, excitedly:

"Fill your glasses, ladies and gentlemen! I feel as if I ought to say gentlemen and ladies for a change. I hope you all appreciate the Hell Broth? Unless you do, you needn't fill your glasses quite full. Everybody can't like Hell Broth——"

"It is a perfectly gorgeous drink, Miss Bruce!" said Perry gallantly, seconding Louy's efforts to fill all our glasses while it was yet time. He finally insisted on the good little slavey's having her portion. I saw his deterrent grimace as he sipped his own—nobody else did, or else Perry would not be loved as he is. I went boldly ahead with the stinging mess, for even if it *did* disagree with

me, I should not be crosser next day on Hell Broth than Lady Violet would be on toast-and-water.

"Good resolutions, ladies!" cried Jehane; "be ready with them!"

"Oh, hang good resolutions!" said Perry; "they never come to anything. Something less depressing. Good wishes, now for the year to come!"

"I wish I may sell my old wall-flower of a picture!" said Margot.

"I hope I shall get on to another paper. I want to get on to all the papers," said Jehane loudly, to all whom it might or might not concern.

"And I hope I shall manage to get my novel —when I write it — serialised—or syndicated." Desdemona Cresswell seconded her with these dark words.

"I hope I shall get to know the author of *Imposthumes*," said Mrs Coles—and added hastily: "And that Wee Oneie may get over his stutter!"

I was standing close to Mariuscha. She said very quietly, as if she did not wish to be overheard, but would not care if she were: "I hope for a death."

She fingered her necklace. It was evidently connected with this death in her mind. I moved, and she noticed that I had overheard her. Most people would have perpetrated a little deprecatory laugh, or so on, but Mariuscha was not one to condescend to apologise for herself. To me there was even something fine and fascinating about her cold, proud selfishness.

I did not hope at all. I have long since left off hoping; it is healthier.

Twelve o'clock struck, and Desdemona burst dramatically into tears. I should have said she was the one person among us who had least to reproach herself with, but one never knows!

"Well, Desdy, you *are* emotional," said Jehane kindly. "Quite creditable of her, isn't it? You see, we working girls are really not altogether mannish, after all." She appealed to the black-coats, who were decorously pretending not to notice Desdemona's lapse. "Shall I lend you my pocket-handkerchief? I haven't one to my name. Louy uses them as berthes and fichus on her Sundays out, I do believe! Never mind, old girl, you are quite in the picture!"

"Dry up, sweet!" said Perry, producing the necessary napkin.

I began to gather that these two were engaged, or ought to be. It would represent Perry's eighth engagement. He had a way of taking up contracts cheerfully, without clear views as to their future fulfilment. He is a dear boy.

Then we had the usual concomitants of a London anniversary. Our ears were assailed on all sides by the motley mixture of bells, cat-calls, buzzers, hooters, and all the grotesque noises by which modern materialists choose to usher in the ceremonial sentiment of the past. It is perhaps artistically suitable that it should be the calls of labour which most loudly signalise the in-coming

year of toil, while the mild Christian bells are lost in the purely business din which heralds a new and possibly better balance sheet.

Crestfallen, silent, and finished all our emotion, we blundered down the narrow stairs again to supper and more Hell Broth, and perhaps a little cheap claret for the weaker heads among us. The sandwiches, like rocks, dykes, and escarpments, were piled on tiny plates arranged according to Louy's theory of symmetry on the garish red and blue Russian table-cloth. The Spode dish was in full force. There were four different kinds of sandwiches in all, enlivened with obstreperous green stuff; Jehane began on one, and found it difficult to keep in bounds.

"Too much cress, Louy!" she murmured. "Still, one soon gets the trick of keeping it in—like eating macaroni. With that you have to never break the connection between the plate and your mouth——"

Jehane was not particularly successful at "keeping it in." Miss Bligh, who cares a good deal for appearances, avoided the pitfall completely. As for Desdemona, I observed her eviscerating poor Louy's artless confections and slily abstracting the gristle.

"You dainty puss!" said Perry, who caught her throwing the rejected pabulum behind the fireplace. She was not offended; Perry did not mean her to be. Mariuscha ate nothing at all, but smoked sweetly, and Casimir Livingston watched her.

Then Margot Bligh upset a glass of Hell Broth over her angel sleeves, and cleverly laid the accident to Mr Langshire. Margot never wastes anything, not even a *contretemps*. Perry, who was the real culprit, said nothing, seeing that Margot was making his crime the grounds of another appeal to the millionaire to go and see her "pic." Langshire agreed, but having made one concession, he did not think it necessary to offer to see her home; this young man is evidently quietly, and unostentatiously aware of his own value, and never fills the measure of condescension full to overflowing. He seems a good sort, but I do not think Margot will get him, although he will probably buy her picture out of complaisance, if she manages well.

The hour had come. Hell Broth could tempt us no more to folly. Jehane's eyes looked tired. "Heavens, but I see myself sending up the rottenest copy to-morrow!" she whispered to me. I said "Good-bye." My brother went off cheerfully with his latest, who lives with a cross old uncle who has no sympathy for her literary aspirations, and yet who doesn't give her enough to keep herself in chiffon bows without aid from her talent. All this she told me in the box room. Mr Livingston hoped to be able to escort Mariuscha. I sympathised with him when I saw his face fall on discovering that she lived one flat below. It fell still further when he incidentally learned that she lived there alone. I did not

sympathise with him there. What would he have? We were all working women! Even Mariuscha, if she did not actually have to earn her bread, had certainly to earn her butter and cigarettes. How she did it was no concern of mine, or, so far, of his either.

Having apparently a fixed idea, as nice men are apt to have, that some one must share his hansom and take him "out of his way" according to the modest formula in use among well-behaved, mealy-mouthed women, he insisted on taking *me* back to Dampier Square. It was just as I thought: the more it was out of his way, the more he liked it. But he had no desire to flirt with me, it was just niceness. On the way we discovered a mutual acquaintance in old Ralph Hardman, of Hardman Hall, where Lady Violet and I generally go to stay a fortnight some time in the year. Ralph Hardman is Lady Violet's cousin. Every one of his distant relations apparently lives in a chronic state of wanting poor old Ralph's money—all, excepting Lady Violet, who has plenty of her own.

He has a great deal of it, and he is childless. His wife died a year ago. Needy, seedy relations batten on him. Casimir Livingston is no relation, and one saw that naturally the old fellow would enjoy the visits of this nice, clean, irresponsible, well-provided-for young man without *arrière pensée* of any kind. Of that last I am sure from his face. I am seldom deceived in faces.

## CHAPTER IV

HERBERT LANGSHIRE put Margot Bligh into the hansom she could ill afford, and, with a sweet air of dependence, she gave him the name of a street in Bayswater to repeat to the cabman. She hoped that Langshire also was making a note of it. He raised his hat, she smiled a not too surburbanly effusive good-bye to him, and the hansom started on its way.

She leaned her elbows on the door and pondered: "How far can I go for a shilling?"

Having decided that point, somewhere about Oxford Circus, she got out, telling the cabman that she had discovered a shilling was all she had on her, and that therefore sooner than cheat him or have a row, she preferred to get out and walk. The cabman sulkily concurred, for he lived at Kennington—"If it had been on his way home now!"

Bareheaded, her heavy dark cloak masking the glories of the Botticelli dress, whose component parts cost none of them more than fourpence halfpenny, had the truth been known, Margot walked steadily homeward. She had an umbrella

in her hand, which, as she suavely tiptoed downstairs in the company of young Mr Langshire, she had skilfully concealed in the folds of the cloak she had worn on her way there. Returning, she did not think it worth while to put it on, the night was so warm and her hair had served its turn. As she walked, she mused over her silk foundation, and wondered if she had "got it up" properly; this point was unfortunately settled when she arrived at the garden gate of the little house in Bayswater and prepared to trip up the three or four steps that led up to the door. She put her foot through the flounce of it, and rattled out a sharp expletive for the benefit of the policeman who stood waiting for her to produce that warrant of respectability, a latch-key. With his bull's-eye cocked on her, she inserted the key in the keyhole and disappeared from his view.

She dropped her umbrella into the japanned hatstand with a loud clatter. A figure forthwith appeared on the landing, clad in the solid trailing robes of night. It was the conventional maternal figure, night-capped, with the dead eyes of age rendering the face meaningless, and the mouth fallen in where the gleaming row of teeth should be. Margot made an exclamation of impatience.

"Oh, mother, you promised me that you would go to bed!"

"So I did, dearie. But I could not resist the temptation of just popping out to ask if you have had a good time?"

"No, not particularly; why should I? And to hear a woman of your age using slang, standing there in her nightgown——"

"My dear Maggie, I can only say I must have got it from you. You must not let pleasure make you cross, darling."

"Please don't call it pleasure, mother. Touting for orders isn't pleasure, it's hard work. I am dead tired, I wish you would let me go to bed."

"Of course, dear, I must not be selfish——" Margot pushed past the selfish old woman, hastily imprinting a gingerly kiss on her brow and ran up to her own room. This was a pretty Dresden shepherdess-like apartment with curtains and bed-spread and toilet-cover and everything workable worked in crewels by Margot for Margot. I have often seen it, but I have never been permitted to envisage Mrs Bligh's room. I long to discover if Margot has worked a coverlid for her mother?

Margot breakfasted in bed next day. Her mother brought it up to her, and lit her fire for her and left her to dress. About eleven o'clock she rose and shut herself up in the studio, refusing to come forth to lunch. In the afternoon she went out to tea, so she did not really see her mother to speak to till the evening meal. By that time she had sauntered into a friend's library and looked out the family of Langshire in all its branches. Several of them were in "Who's Who." Langshire was in "County Families": Herbert Walters Langshire had a place in the country, a house in

Hans Place, and belonged to several good Clubs. . . . Her eyes glistened. She was glad to think that she had begged him to defer his call till next Sunday, when some adequate preparation could be made for him, and her mother drilled into becomingness. She was very thoughtful as she wended her way into the little dining-room, holding her neck out to the servant to have her blouse fastened before she sat down.

"Are you sure your hands are clean, Sarah?" she asked fretfully. "What it is not to have a proper maid!"

"Couldn't I do it?" asked her mother meekly.

"You, dear—why, you would be all day fumbling at it, wouldn't you?"

She ate her soup and nibbled her toast in silence, and her mother waited patiently for such crumbs of conversation as might fall from her daughter's lips. They were dry crumbs, and there were very few of them.

"What did you do—who did you see last night, dear?"

"Oh, Jehane's usual crowd. There's not much use in my letting off a long string of names you never heard of. What's this, Sarah? Oh, the eternal sirloin! Why must we have joints, mother?"

"My dear, what else can we have? You have spoilt your appetite, I fear, with little cakes at tea."

Margot denied the cakes, but would not have

any beef, and began to eat bread and butter heavily sprinkled with salt and pepper. The old woman's eyes filled with tears.

"You will completely destroy the coats of your stomach, dear, by that. Young ladies should never touch the cruet. Will you not try a little pudding, darling?"

"It seems an extraordinary looking compound!" Margot turned it over with a spoon. "Who made it?"

"I did, dearie, to tempt you, out of that new cookery book."

"It is the great mistake, I always think," said Margot, "for incompetent people to tamper with new receipts. Do let Sarah stick to the things she can do, and don't you muddle in. And I wanted to tell you—but all this nearly drove it out of my head—there's a man coming to see my 'pic.' on Sunday, and I must have a decent tea and a good cake, mind. Couldn't we run to a Buzzard for once?"

"Of course, dear; I am glad you mentioned it. By the bye, Dr Jenkins was in to-day."

"What has that to do with a Buzzard cake?" asked Margot. "Well, what did he say? The usual thing, I suppose—more fresh air and exercise, and then you don't do it."

"It is dreary work tramping about these dull town streets all alone——"

"Now then, mother, please don't whine. You mean you want us to go and live in the country

in a little earwiggy cottage in the village where you were born. Think of my art! *I* must, if you don't."

"I know, dear. I always tell Jenkins that for us to move is quite out of the question—but——"

Margot interrupted her. "And I do believe that I have got a chance of selling my 'pic.' after all, and then we might have a week at Brighton on the strength of it."

"That's the picture you call 'Crabbed Youth and Age,' isn't it, dearie?"

"Get the title right, mother; you do make such a fool of it. Well, I think I can put 'Crabbed Age and Youth' into the man who is coming here on Sunday. He is frightfully well off."

"Oh, I am glad, dearie; for if he is rich, the price of the picture will be a mere flea-bite to him, as you may say——"

"As you may *not* say," muttered her daughter. "If you are going to talk like that to him, I don't suppose he will ever come near us again, after the first taste of you."

"I won't, dearie, I won't! I won't open my lips to him. I won't come into the room while he is here at all, if you like."

"No, I don't want to seem quite unchaperoned." Margot meditated aloud. "He must see I have got a mother, at least; it is more respectable, and I can see that he is a very respectable young man. Not at all the kind of person I should have expected to meet at old Jehane's. Now,

mother, if this function is concluded, I vote we have Sarah in to clear."

She rose, and, going to the fireside, buried herself in a book, thus avoiding a view of Sarah, whose unpicturesqueness hurt her. Besides, she did not like to see her mother helping the maid to remove the traces of their repast, as the old lady always insisted upon doing. Mrs Bligh was a clergyman's daughter, but, as she said herself, had always been brought up to use her hands. She was fairly obedient, wore the clothes her daughter designed for her, and the style of cap that suited her rather severe profile; but, as Margot complained, she was always pining to get out of the picture and back into her vulgar, countrified ways.

The young artist attached deep importance to this visit from Herbert Langshire. Personally, she was not in the least taken with him, but she could not help thinking that he might possibly buy her picture merely as a means of inaugurating pleasant intimacy, and although she was not attracted by him, there was no reason why he should not be attracted by her. "The men that fall in love with one are, unfortunately, never the men one would have picked out," she reflected sadly. "That would be too much of a good thing. Thank God, I have so far kept clear of artistic entanglements. I might have succumbed to a master at the Slade, or so on. Artists should keep themselves free—till their first success, at any rate."

Early on Sunday afternoon, the studio—*i.e.*, the drawing-room, which Margot had seized upon and appropriated last year, when she painted her first "five-footer"—was carefully swept and garnished. Chrysanthemums were cheap. Margot placed them carelessly in green pots that looked as if they came from France, in brass pots that looked as if they came from Syria, in earth-coloured pots that might have come from nowhere. The colour scheme had been carefully thought out—"He *may* have an eye for colour; but probably has not," Margot thought—"too ascetic-looking!"

The picture was unveiled and placed in an advantageous light. It represented a divinely tall maiden, whose features faintly suggested Margot's own, tenderly supporting an aged crone, whose lineaments were those of Mrs Bligh, and no mistake. Margot had "saved" a model off her mother, who had posed for her in the old sofa-cover that Sarah washed out last year. Near by, Polly the dummy, in the very daffodil-coloured robe worn by the youthful figure in the picture, glared scornfully with her blunted features at the human beauty she might never emulate. Sarah had disposed the tea-table in a Moorish recess whose overhanging draperies occasionally tickled one's chin. Margot deftly moved it a little out of the way. Herbert Langshire must not be annoyed by trifles.

Mrs Bligh was to officiate at the tea-table, and make her entry with the kettle, and not till then. She knew her part. Sarah, to be euphoniously

spoken of as "my old nurse," although she had only been in the place for a bare two years, was recommended to have her hands clean, and to wear the apron of artistic pattern that Miss Bligh had designed and cut out for her in the course of the week. All the doors and windows were left open, and the mighty draught thus created swept the house clear of the poignant odour of the Sunday roast.

Margot's own toilet was to be as simple and neglected as was consistent with a perfect attention to details. She dressed well, always, on nothing, and she knew it; but how much better would she have dressed on something, a few hundreds even! She took more trouble with her mother's attire than her own. Mrs Bligh was to wear her black, her best, and for all ornament a tiny paste brooch and some wrist buckles that Margot was prepared to lend for the occasion. In the dim dawn of history, they had been Mrs Bligh's own property, but years ago were ruthlessly commandeered by the imperious young artist. As she skilfully ruffled her own flowing locks, so she smoothed the wan white strands of hair which scantily covered the elder's pink forehead. In the case of crabbed age, the standard of dignity rather than that of picturesqueness was before the daughter's eyes.

After lunch, old Mrs Bligh, overcome with a sense of imminence and responsibility, went to sleep in a chair in the dining-room, and Margot,

after complacently admiring her own handiwork—"An admirable fake of a mother, though I say it as shouldn't!"—went off to add finishing touches to her own costume and to lie down for a few minutes, so as to get rid of a somewhat unbecoming roast-beef redness, which was not quite in the picture.

A very few seconds after Margot had gone, Mrs Bligh awoke with a start! . . .

She glanced at the clock under the little round mirror on the mantel-piece. She had been asleep exactly an hour!

Was it possible? She rose stiffly to ascertain, only half awake as yet. Her own image arrested her attention. She thought she had too much colour, and it frightened her. She was suddenly possessed by a desire to gain the shelter of her own room; she feared Margot would scold her for having indigestion on a day like this!

What day was it? What *was* the occasion? She knew only that Margot had seemed very much excited, and a great deal of fuss was being made. She remembered something like it once, when her eldest daughter, Margot's sister, had been married. Her mind was full of this incident as she slowly proceeded upstairs, and, entering her own room, stood in front of the strip of looking-glass nailed into the wardrobe.

"The poor child!" she said to herself. "It is a great day for her. To think I have never seen the man she is going to marry! Well, perhaps

it is as well; I might have put him off. Eh, I am very black!"

She smoothed out her dress as she stood before the mirror. "Let me see, it will be ten years since I have worn colours."

She began to open drawers and cupboards. In the room overhead Margot was sound asleep. Mrs Bligh ferreted about in a purposeless way and came upon dresses that had hardly been worn, that had been put away when her husband died suddenly, and her daughter Margaret was sent for home from her school in France. They had been made in the days before the young artist had had the opportunity of forming and correcting her mother's taste, which had always been for the florid and flamboyant.

The old lady drew her best dress of Sundays ten years ago out of its linen wrapping. It was intact. Its colours had hurt Margot's eyes, or she would have cut it up for curtains or chair-covers years ago. It was a mustard-coloured silk, with a fringe of the same shade, and a quantity of turquoise blue bows distributed in a fairly equal manner all over its surface, though placed by preference chiefly in regions where nothing could possibly be tied. It was very full and very short. Mrs Bligh smiled at it as if it were an old friend.

"My dear husband always thought those bows very effective," she murmured; "it is a poor compliment to his taste to hide it away all these years! Whatever can I have been thinking of?"

She smiled all the time she was putting it on, and when the last hook was hooked, she gave a deep breath of constriction and satisfaction.

"That grips one properly," she muttered. "I always said that Coote was a very good dressmaker, and I have never paid her bill yet, I believe. I must speak to Margot about it."

She had been forced to take off her cap in order to get the dress over her head, and she forgot to resume it. Her hair was ruffled across the front and at the back, where the hooks had caught it. What she had lost in dignity she had gained in *espièglerie* — a quality in which a mother could hardly hope to shine in a daughter's eyes. The paste brooch lay on the floor, a sure sign for Margot, should her eye fall on it, that something was wrong. But Margot still slept on upstairs.

The old lady sauntered downstairs and resumed her seat near the fire in the dining-room. Luncheon was now cleared away, and the three apples and two oranges which were the joy of Margot's eyes, relegated to their places on the sideboard, where they struck their accustomed note in the scheme of colour.

The front door bell rang, softly. . . .

Sarah, whose instructions had been incomplete, was puzzled by being asked formally if *Mrs* Bligh was at home, as a well-brought-up man like Herbert Langshire did as a matter of course, and showed the visitor into the room where that

lady was, fallen half asleep again. Herbert Langshire had just time to take in the pictorial values of an old lady in mustard colour and blue trimmings, and above her head a dish of rosy-cheeked apples and golden oranges, when she woke with a senile jump, and transfixing the maid behind him with watery and reproachful eyes, thus apostrophised her:

"Oh, Sarah, you should not——" Then to the decorous young man who stood there on the threshold, hat in hand: "Mr—Mr—would you mind kindly passing into the studio?"

She then turned away as if to signify that the interview was closed.

"Goodness mercy me! If Maggie was to catch me talking to her young man by myself!" The theory of her daughter's imminent wedding had already gone out of her mind.

The studio into which Herbert Langshire, with discreetly sightless eyes for the nonce, followed the maid, adjoined the dining-room, and Sarah before she pattered away to the downstairs region, bewildered to the point of forgetting to inform her younger mistress of his arrival, left the door open.

Herbert Langshire, with the best of wills, could not help hearing subsequently the frou-frou of silken skirts and the hasty rush of their wearer and her exclamation, given in no measured tones: "I thought I heard the front door bell——"

A pause: the mustard and turquoise vision had had its effect.

"You bad old woman! Have you *quite* taken leave of your senses? To go and put on that beastly old gown! Go and take it off at once—*at once*, do you hear? It's too bad, after all my trouble!"

He heard a confused murmur of submission and talk as the bad old woman managed to convey to her mentor the fact that there was some one in the studio. . . . Slowly, to the half-shocked, half-amused young man, there sauntered in a flushed Botticelli-angel-like figure, with wide blue wings to its teagown, and a wrinkle in its forehead, the result of the problem that this same careless angel was hammering out: "Did he—or did he not—hear what I said to mother?"

Mrs Bligh came in with the tea, a suppressed, depressed figure in black, with paste brooches stuck in anywhere, and a cap placed awry. She was introduced to Herbert Langshire with a pretty deference combined with a slight touch of deprecation, and the young man played up nobly, in no wise indicating by his manner that he had seen this decorous mother before.

Then, strangely enough, he became lively. He felt himself to be in complete sympathy with the old lady—they had a common secret. He thought there was breeding in her quiet queerness, which was absent from her daughter's up-to-date graces. Mrs Bligh reminded him of an old maiden aunt of his own, long since dead, whose lineage was irreproachable. He was a spoilt young man, and

he chose now to address his conversation entirely to the mother, in order to punish the daughter, who, moreover, failed to interest him. That young lady was forced for the first time in her life to play second fiddle to her own mother, and she did not like it. They talked about old days in the country, and Herbert Langshire had hardly looked at "Crabbed Age and Youth."

Then it was that I came in, and, seeing poor Margot's predicament, talked to the old lady by way of releasing Herbert Langshire. But the young man seemed in no hurry for a *tête-à-tête* with the artist. Neither did he take the opportunity of flight when I came in, but drew his chair closer to Mrs Bligh's, who, with one apprehensive glance at her daughter, allowed him to plunge still deeper into conversation with her. I tried to soothe Margot, and together we strolled up to the picture.

"He has hardly looked at it," she said. "Oh, why did I let mother come in?"

"Mrs Bligh has made quite a conquest, hasn't she?" said I unkindly.

"Yes, I don't mind; but what earthly good is it? It won't make him buy my picture."

"She is having a good time, at any rate, poor old dear. And perhaps she will sell your picture after all."

"Nonsense! I could weep."

"No, don't do that," I said. "Buck up, and retrieve matters as far as possible. Look, he is

feeling for his hat. He is going. Smile. You look pretty when you smile."

Margot then smiled—very sweetly, I must own. Mr Langshire had risen and was saying to Mrs Bligh: "I've enjoyed this little talk with you so much. May I come again?"

"I am going out of town for a short time," said Margot, interrupting. "When I come back, I will let you know."

"Thank you so much. But if I am in your neighbourhood one day soon, Mrs Bligh, would you refuse me a cup of tea and a chat if I called?" asked the young man with mock piteousness.

I saw he was quite a character. Then there is nothing for forming the character like being rich for a certain time, but not being born rich.

"Oh, please do," said Margot's mother nervously. "I shall be very glad indeed to see you—but I fear you would find it so dull without Maggie!"

"Now, Mr Langshire," exclaimed Margot, laughing a little forcedly, "you *must* say that you would like it better without me, and so you make me jealous of my own mother. Indeed, I shall think it most kind of you to look in and cheer mamma up when I am away. I wouldn't think of leaving her, if it wasn't for business. That is the worst of a profession like mine. Poor mamma is often very lonely."

"You needn't talk of that now, my dear," said Mrs Bligh, with a touch of bitterness.

"Then you will come," said Margot to Herbert

Langshire, giving him her pretty little manicured hand, "and I shall be able to go away happy."

In her old-fashioned way, Mrs Bligh insisted on seeing the visitor to the door. I remained behind with Margot, who put her head on her hands and cried.

"Oh, Carrie, what a mess I have made of it—or, rather, what a mess mother has made of it! I declare——"

Mrs Bligh came back just then and put her hand on Margot's shoulder.

"That's a nice young man, Maggie. Dearie, you are crying! What has upset you?"

"Nothing, mother. Only he never even looked at my picture."

"Don't you fret, dear; I will show it to him myself, when you are away. My darling child, I have got a little bit of a confession to make to you."

"Shall I go?" I asked.

"No, Carrie, don't go. You know us so well. What is it, mother?"

"I took off the blue dress, dearie, you see, as you told me, but not before he had seen it."

"Mercy, mother, what can you mean?"

"That silly Sarah showed him into the dining-room first, and he saw Me! I am distressed about it, for I can't help thinking that's the reason he didn't value your picture, seeing you had taken such a bad eye for colour from your poor old mother. I am truly sorry, dearie. Won't you forgive me, and we'll try to set it right."

"I don't suppose it's that at all, mother," said Margot abjectly. "Don't bother. I suppose he heard what I said to you about your get-up when I came down. I have been suspecting it all the afternoon, and his behaviour convinces me. I wish to goodness you hadn't given me a chance of scolding you before people like that. I am not really a bad-tempered woman, as anybody who knows me knows—don't they, Carrie?—but he will go away thinking so. I shall call my picture, 'Crabbed Youth and Age,' after all," she added, rather cleverly, as I thought, "and we shall see if mother will be able to sell it to him under that title?"

## CHAPTER V

WHO will have it all?

This question, mean but inevitable, rose to my mind as the train lazily bore Lady Violet and myself one golden week-end afternoon through the pleasant county of Sussex on our way to Hardman Hall. Hardman Hall would be a show place if it could be shown. The grounds are magnificent, and the Early English flower-garden is the finest in Sussex; the furniture the most correct and mediæval that can be got at Christie's, whose sales Mr Ralph Hardman has attended regularly for years. He thinks nothing of spending a hundred guineas or so on a chair. Every article of use and luxury is the best that taste can select or money buy. The pictures, the china, the manuscripts, the books, are such as to make collectors' mouths water, and tyros blink with incompetent envy.

Ralph Hardman, though a weird, shy, ugly, old gentleman of sixty-seven, is by no means averse from the sight of his fellow-creatures, and likes his museum-like rooms furnished with live articles of *vertù* as well as inanimate ones. Pleasant

people are asked to dine at his trestle table and sit on his uncomfortable chairs that cost so much and "look nothing," as Lady Violet says. From the periodical assemblages of guests that he is in the habit of collecting, he is popularly supposed to be inclined to choose an heir, with which commodity he is as yet said to be unprovided. He has no absurd bias in favour of charitable institutions, but wants to found a family, to which end it is decreed that the happy mortal selected must adopt his name.

My mistress, who often plays hostess for him in an informal way, is well enough off to take the problem of succession to the goods of her opulent relation in the light of amusement.

"It is great fun," she said to me in the train, after we had passed Horsham, "to see how dear old Ralph contrives to jockey them all, and utilise their shameless cupidity to give him an interest in life. I wonder what he has got down there now in the way of *pretendants?* I must have Mason up this evening and pump her."

I always consider this proceeding rather a caddish one. Mason is the housekeeper, not at all the stout black satin lady with yards of gold watch-chain one is used to in novels, but a spare, hectic female with a pointed nose and a narrow chest, like a Sunday School teacher, or the mistress of a stationer's shop in a country town. There is no *bonhomie* about her, but she has some eye for character, and Lady Violet's title is a key that

unlocks all her confidence. She, too, is aware that she is "well left," and that the ultimate disposition of the bulk of the Hardman property concerns her no more than it does Lady Violet. I hate her.

As we drove up, I caught sight of my artist friend, Margot Bligh, established in the shrubberies, evidently painting the house. I hoped it was a commission. Of course it was. Cunning little Margot! How had she managed to get hold of Ralph Hardman? Who had recommended her? I nodded as effusively as a companion dared, and promised myself a good gossip later on.

Lady Violet made an unfortunate entry. She knocked her bonnet off, passing under the old carved doorway, and flounced round and scolded me, to the intense interest of the gaping servants.

"I have only a few hairs," she said, "and you have taken care to pin my bonnet to three of them. I am now suffering intense agony. How are you, Ralph? What a filthy smell!"

"Sulphuric acid," said Mr Hardman calmly. "Mr Livingston"— he indicated the very pretty young man I had met at Jehane's party — "is helping me to decipher an old lease."

"Yes," said Mr Livingston ingeniously, "and the effect of the acid so soon wears off——"

"You mean you want me to go. Pray don't mind me. Old women were made to be neglected. Where's tea?"

"*Fors pres les forspres.* . . . What the deuce

does that mean?" murmured old Ralph. "What did you say, Violet?"

"I asked for tea," said Lady Violet, "and you don't suppose I intend to sit down and drink it in this stink? Come, Caroline, get hold of Mason. Poor Ralph grows more featherbeddy every day. He won't cheat the grave long. That's the *new one*!"

This impressive whisper could not have been lost on one of the two men we left behind us poring over the Tudor lease. We made our way into an inner room, where Margot Bligh was hovering over the teapot, which utensil she was evidently shy of handling in the presence of Lady Violet, a near relation, and a lady of known acerbity and cantankerousness.

"Yes, you can make tea," Lady Violet remarked, without any further acknowledgment of her presence. Margot, one could see, yearned to tell her that she wasn't a servant, but a visitor like herself. I could not, of course, speak to my friend about what interested us both till Lady Violet had had her two full cups. Lady Violet accepted them at poor Margot's hands, simply looking through her, thus insulting art in the person of the tea-maker, as Margot said, when at last the old lady elected to take herself off to her own room. On pretence of collecting the wraps and seeing to the dog, I stayed behind a moment and questioned Margot, in the plain, unvarnished fashion with which we working girls are wont to address each other.

"How did you get in here?"

"Mariuscha," replied Margot; "she knew that old Mr Hardman was good for a portrait of his place—it will be the twenty-seventh he has had done, but the last shall be first, and she secured the job for a 'pal.' I packed up my traps and came down here, without knowing my host from Adam. No matter. I daresay I shall manage to put 'Crabbed Age' into him before I have done. Truly, Carrie, if I don't get that 'pic.' off soon, I shall go into a decline or get jaundice, or something like that. I hate doing landscape, but anything to get 'Crabbed Age' off, so strict attention to business! The worst of it is, there is such a good-looking man here—he distracts me frightfully."

"Another needy adventurer, I suppose?"

"Possibly, I wouldn't trust him; but, Carrie, after all, it is perfectly legitimate, when an old place like this is practically going for the asking. This man has eyes that nobody could refuse anything to. Such magnificent drawing about the sockets, don't you know? A firm sweep of chin—here he is, back from the links. He went up with the Barlings—by the way, they are really relations of old Ralph's, but they have not a ghost of a chance—no more than I have. Old Ralph hates them, they are so apologetic and deprecating, with bad tempers held well in leash for the sake of gain, don't you know? The girl is as ugly as he is, and he likes them pretty, does the good man!

Look out of this window, now here, quick!—don't you admire him?"

"Rather barber's blocky," I said. I don't know why, but I did not choose to admit the man's obvious good looks to her. Just as he came under the porch Lady Violet crept downstairs again in search of me, piping out: "Caroline, Caroline! You've had time to find six cloaks in the time you've been gossiping away down there. I don't pay you to——"

She was interrupted in her recapitulation of the terms of my engagement by Ralph Hardman, who came out of the library, and joining the handsome man, introduced him to Lady Violet as Colonel Lisbon.

He was, of course, not introduced to me. Why should he be? Yet I felt my position, as the saying is. I was hauled away peremptorily by my mistress.

"Now, Caroline, come along and bring Fidgie. Don't nip her stomach like that. Go and tell Mason that I shall be glad to see her in my rooms, if she can spare a moment."

I gave the message. Mason was glad to spare many moments. She came to Lady Violet's room and stood in the doorway, coyly waiting to be asked to sit down. I chose to remain standing.

"Well, Mason, how is it all going on? Has he been altering His Will in anybody's favour lately?"

Mason seemed to have nothing to say, a sure

sign that there was a good deal waiting to be elicited.

"I can't say I think much of the present lot of aspirants," continued Lady Violet; "weedy—raw—too much high collar and golf-stocking."

"Neither of *those* have a ghost of a chance, Lady Violet," replied Mason, primming her lips.

"I suppose, Mason, you think that that clerical couple, who seem too frightened to speak, have a better claim? Well, they are relations, at least. Old Barling crooks his little finger over his teacup just as Ralph does, and the girl has the family umbrella nose, and spread figure. Upon my word, a woman's a fool to let her figure go, and not even look healthy at that."

"It would make no difference, Lady Violet, if Miss Barling laced herself till she burst. Mr Hardman's as likely to make Miss Courtenay here" —I jumped at the magnitude of the implication— "his heir as any of them that's in the house at this moment. Just playing with them, that's what he is. It amuses him——"

"And hurts them," suggested Lady Violet. "Now, my good Mason, be more explicit. You know something."

"You do *not* flatter me, Lady Violet," said Mason, meaning that she was replete with the information attributed to her.

"Out with it then, Mason. You and I are old friends, you know."

"Oh, Lady Violet! Well, then, Lady Violet and

Miss Courtenay, you can take it from me, the person who will get it all is just a girl—a typewriter girl—like Miss Courtenay here might be, don't you know——"

"Yes, I know the sort of thing—a mere nobody—a dependent."

"She came here with her ugly machine thing, and copied some of his manuscripts out for him, and just typed herself into hearth and home, as you might say."

"That must have been three summers ago, when I was away in Heligoland. But who is she? You don't mean there's a chance of his marrying her?"

"Yes, if she were to want him to. But she don't want, not she; he isn't either smart enough, or young enough. She didn't really like the master, not personally, just flirted with him what was necessary to get herself well left. Didn't stick at a kiss or two, neither, for I caught her myself in the study one day. In I went and gave up my situation on *the* spot."

"Well, Mason, you *have* a spirit! But you knew, of course, that your resignation would not be accepted?"

"I counted on that, Lady Violet. I said: 'Either this lady'—yes, I gave her lady—'goes, or I do, sir. I beg to leave you to choose.'"

"And he packed her out of the house instanter, eh?"

"M—yes, she left. She didn't mind. I believe it was what she was waiting for, myself, something

of the kind. He gave her a champagne dinner for a good send-off. The Barlings were in the house at the time, but they are so poor-spirited that they dursn't interfere. But—Lady Violet—to spite Me, he altered his Will, and left the house and every penny to her. 'Tis the solemn truth, and I am in the position to know it."

Lady Violet grinned. She knew well the kneeling position frequently assumed by Mason.

"It was exactly what the girl was working for. We are all aware that there's something wrong with his heart, and that he may have a cerebus that will carry him off any minute. She just packed her box and went quietly off to London, and took a nice quiet flat in Hardicanute Mansions, Bloomsbury, and lives there comfortable. She can well afford to, for she gets a tidy little sum from Mr Hardman, enough to pay the rent of her flat, and a good deal over. She would not let him give her more. Hypocrite! I heard her arguing it out——"

"Tiring work, stooping, eh, Mason?"

Mason disregarded the rude innuendo which Lady Violet for the life of her could not help making, and went on:

"Nor she won't see him, neither. A nice escape for her; she don't want to see his ugly face now that she has got what she wants. So has he—and that's to spite me—he don't care to see her either. He never really cared for ladies' society; and she won't have to wait long, either, before she comes

into her unjust gains; he is breaking up fast. We all think so, Lady Violet. Mr Martin, too. He took him up his breakfast in bed the other day."

"There's many a slip 'twixt the bed and the grave, Mason," remarked my mistress—one of her nasty speeches. "Well, you *have* given me a nice shock."

I ventured to put a question here. "Mrs Mason, what is Miss Lancaster like?"

"Oh, did I mention her name? I didn't mean to. Not a bad-looking girl—showy, a bit of a Jewess and a gipsy mixed. Her father was a free-thinker, and lectured on atheism. She believes in nothing."

"No more do I," interjected Lady Violet, trying to shock Mason, but in vain, her title held good.

"Well, my lady, of course you are of that station, you know best. Miss Mary Lancaster wears no fringe, but just her hair brushed back from her forehead, like those French improprieties on the picture postcards. She isn't very young—quite eight-and-twenty. She told Mr Hardman she could talk like the Russian gipsies—Maggy's, or something like that. He liked that. She went to Girton, I believe, before her father lost all his money. She's got a mother and sister that won't have her to live with them at any price. I know her address. Master constantly sends letters to the post for her. She looks up things in the British Museum for him. I see long

envelopes full of her handwriting—not love-letters, as I understand love-letters."

"Does she know, do you think, what he has done for her?" asked Lady Violet, who was thoroughly enjoying herself.

"Oh, I expect she knows that," said Mason. "Trust her minxishness to know. Oh—and, Lady Violet, I am almost ashamed to tell you—after she was gone I missed the best necklace—the emerald one."

"Do you mean she stole it?"

"She could not steal it: I had charge of it. He gave it to her all right. She would accept nothing else, though he was always wanting to give her things. The best of everything for her. Mr Hardman once had the necklace valued, and they said it was worth—— Lady Violet, if you will excuse me, there's my master's bell."

"You are terribly entertaining, Mason, but I suppose you must go. I know the price of that necklace. Now, you see, Caroline, what a designing class you are."

I pocketed that little amenity, and left Lady Violet to the severer duties of her toilet. I had five minutes to spare, and I sought Margot's room. She was sure to have a blouse to fasten, and I shouldered mine, intending to beg her to return my slight service in kind.

I saw it all now. It was, of course, Mary Lancaster who had recommended Margot to her munificent patron. That was nice of her, at least.

Women ought to help each other to such good things as are going, but did she know that Mr Hardman had left his money to her, if it was true that he had done so? Mason might be misinformed; eavesdropping is not the surest or the most convenient way of gleaning information. I remembered Miss Lancaster's enigmatic exclamation on New Year's Eve—her strange prayer, "I believe I wish some one to die." Was she really brutal enough to be thinking in such terms of the poor old man who had been kind to her, and whose desired death would make her a rich woman. I knocked at the door of Margot. She had got one of the best rooms—in honour of art, I suppose?

"Oh, come in! Are you a maid? Why, it's Carrie! I was hoping your knock meant somebody come to offer to fasten me."

"Well, I will. Turn round to the light."

I put a pin in here, and a brooch there, pulled her gathers into the middle, and tied the ribbons in her sleeves, then, and not till then, I presented my own back, and begged her to "hook" me.

"What short arms you must have!" she said impatiently. "I wonder you don't have your blouses made to fasten in front; it would save so much trouble. Oh, I do wonder who they will give me to!"

"Probably me," said I. "We shall walk timidly in together. The numbers seem unequal, and, if they are, the companions and artists are bound to go to the wall."

"That's all very well for you, Carrie, but I am a representative of the noblest art in the world. I cannot allow it to be snubbed in my person."

"Let us hope you will get the parson, then."

"I know who I should like," said Margot pensively. "That man—Colonel Lisbon. I could throw over art and everything else for him. Wouldn't you, Carrie?"

"No. Too self-conscious, too froggy."

"Like to like," said Margot. "You are the coldest woman I know, Carrie; you have no temperament."

"Don't *please* use that odious word about me."

"I am not using it about you, that is just it. Now your brother Perry——"

"What has poor Perry been doing now?"

"Jilting Desdemona Cresswell."

"Well, I have no pity for the Desdemona Cresswells of life! They ride for a sentimental fall. They fix their affections too easily. Why, she's only known Perry a month!"

"How long would it take you to fix yours, Carrie?"

"At least three months," said I, humbugging her. "I don't believe in sudden conversions."

"Iceberg! Blanc-mange! Cold shape!" cried Margot, as I left her and went back to Lady Violet.

I found the lady's door locked against me, and could get no answer to my knocking. She is taken that way sometimes. I turned away, to dawdle about, and return at a more propitious moment,

and encountered Colonel Lisbon in the corridor. He fled, but not before the door of Lady Violet's room had opened and my mistress herself issued forth waving a soiled handkerchief, and exclaiming: "Where on earth have I put my spectacles?" He was by no means out of earshot.

Of course I knew what had happened. She had thrown that useful piece of mechanism, instead of the handkerchief, into the clothes-basket. I mildly suggested this to her.

"I suppose my mind is going now!" she mumbled, piqued by her own mental lapse, for which she chose to consider me responsible. Loudly she remarked: "I'm sure I don't know why I keep a paid memory, if I am allowed to do things like that."

It was not in flesh and blood to refrain from the obvious rejoinder. "You had carefully locked your memory out of the room, you see. The gong has sounded. Shall we go down?"

"As soon as you will kindly allow me to pass out of my room," Lady Violet rejoined, with the acerbity I fully deserved, but had had my money's worth for. "If you choose to stand there blocking up the whole passage——"

We progressed downstairs. I avoided Lady Violet's train by a hundred miles. She was as nervous about it as a cat if you threaten to touch its whiskers. The carpet was rucked up in some unforeseen way at the bottom of the staircase, and Lady Violet stopped and stared at it as if it

constituted an impassable barrier. Colonel Lisbon, standing in the hall below, with his eyes in the air, looking at nothing in particular, dropped them, saw the difficulty and sprang adroitly forward.

"Allow me!"

His tone slightly suggested the shop-walker, but he was efficient. The obstacle was removed, and Lady Violet passed on *à la* Queen Elizabeth, smiling on her new Raleigh.

"He is 'on the make,' too," said I to myself bitterly. "A pity, for it is really quite good-looking."

## CHAPTER VI

We all shook down as ill as usual in this extremely composite household. All these persons, divided by a common interest, hated and gave each other the widest of berths. Old Ralph treated them all in the same way ; that is to say, he got what amusement he possibly could out of them, despised them heartily, fed them well, and laughed at them.

I except young Mr Livingston, whom I felt, rather than knew, to have no ulterior object in making himself agreeable to his host. It was his first visit, and probably would be his last. He was one of those sweet, sunshiny young men who have no living to earn, or axes to grind, who have a good digestion and a good tailor, who go where they are asked, unless there is a good reason to the contrary, and when once they are in a man's house throw themselves eagerly into whatever may be going forward. The morning after our arrival he was deeply engaged in capturing gold-fish with the aid of a shrimping-net out of the fountain in the middle of the lawn, which had become so choked up with tadpoles that it had to be temporarily emptied. He worked *con amore*, though he was

but seldom rewarded by any glint of gold in the clots of mud which filled the net at every haul, and it was a very hot day. He was as happy as a child over a new game ; he is the stuff of which good pioneers and Colonists are made.

The dull Barlings and Colonel Lisbon were helping him by looking on. Margot Bligh had abandoned her canvas, and in a washed-out pink muslin, was drivelling about "the poor, dear little tadpoles," and stopping her nostrils alternately. Mr Hardman was quietly happy. Only I was cross. I could not help it. Lady Violet, considering the reek of the freshly-disturbed mud as only inferior to that of the sulphuric acid the day before, complained loudly of Ralph's "dirty ploys," and made me establish her chair, her footstool, and her novel as far away as possible from the smell, though not too far to prevent her from keeping an eye on the proceedings. Thus, with sniffs and adverse comments, she thought to while the morning away.

Presently the sun went behind a cloud, and she pretended to feel chilly, and sent me in to fetch a shawl. I don't think I stopped more than ten seconds beside the scene of operations on my return, but she resented it, and sulkily opposed her shoulder to the shawl I put round her, remarking without apparent irony : "Come along, come along ; you seem to think that you are here to enjoy yourself."

"No, I don't think that at all," I replied, gently but obviously. It vexed her, of course.

She continued: "One would think the house was half a mile away instead of a few yards. I know exactly what you did—you went up to the room my friends gave you to affix that killing bow" (Lady Violet thought this phrase literary). "You wanted to impress one of those loafing cadgers over there, playing the fool with a shrimping-net and a few poor fish that they are hunting and harrying out of existence! Now, didn't you? You are more of a baby than you look, Caroline."

"Perhaps you didn't notice, but I was wearing this particular cravat at breakfast," I answered. It was never worth while to be nasty to Lady Violet, she returned all gibes with interest, and I was a little sorry for her. The sun had come out again, and was finding out the weak places in her sheltering tree; she was liverish to-day, and she had had some bad news at breakfast.

The nonagenarian countess of the Memoirs was dead. She began on her favourite topic, and it is one on which, by constant brooding, she has arrived at some degree of clairvoyance. She sometimes achieves pathos, and impresses me in spite of myself.

"But, I suppose, old women are made to be neglected? It is a law of nature. Our work is done" (I didn't see how she could say that since she had never borne a child). "There are no fashions designed for us, no bonnets made to suit us, no bread baked without a crust, no specialising for our cases, no comfort anywhere. I am getting not to

be able to walk without a stick, or see without glasses, or eat without false teeth. When it comes to that, that one's body ceases to be self-supporting but has to be eked out all along from extraneous sources, when one has to borrow all one's five senses, so to speak, then the end may come when it likes! I shan't be sorry. If I hadn't a little money, I suppose I shouldn't even have you, or such as you, Caroline, to look after me, and you are by way of being a relation, and ought to do it for love."

"I am sure I would if I could."

I meant that I could not afford to do so, but no doubt she took it the other way. Yet the *equivoque* was surely pardonable? It was unconscious, and I do so hate being called Caroline! The sun was very strong; Lady Violet told me sharply to hold her umbrella "more over" her—it *was* an umbrella, and not a silly, flimsy parasol. My own undefended cheek tingled, and the hand that held the heavy ornamented stick of the umbrella shook, but my task-mistress was too much depressed to notice. We were some distance from the reek of the fountain, but I smelt it. A deadly sense of faintness stole over me. I was feebly considering what I should do—I hesitated—I was on the point of falling—when Colonel Lisbon came up to where we were established under the catalpa tree, and for the second time I heard the classic phrase, "Allow me!"

Then I did faint. Oh, the disgrace of it all!

Of course I don't know what happened after that, but even in my swoon I seemed to be conscious of Lady Violet's displeasure. The last word I heard her say as I went off, "So unnecessary," convinced me that she would at once proceed to remove all possible glamour from the situation in the bystander's eyes, by particularising various items of diet that might have "disagreed" with me.

I came to myself in the big hall, where I suppose I had been hustled, in the purposely wooden arms of Mrs Mason, who made short and unsympathetic work of me, and edged me off upstairs as soon as I could walk with the help of the banisters. I spent the remainder of the day in my room. A fainting fit is really not worth while for a companion, stripped of its sensation, divested of all sentimental interest, and with a bad headache for sole residue.

When evening fell I fancied the air might do my head good, so while they were having dinner, I caught up a wrap and went down to the garden.

I don't like spring. I don't admire its seasonable manifestations that people go so wild over. I don't admire crude glints of Rickett's Blue sky seen through scudding rain-drifts, or awkward contrasts of tender pink buds growing straight out of a black bough, or the sharp corners of the celandine's white petals resting on the dark earth. The spring sun seems always to shine on the wrong side of things that the spring wind obligingly turns over for it. The steel-grey flash of the swallows in March sets my teeth on edge,

like the squeak of a slate-pencil, and I can't help sniffing the sour smell of the upturned sods as if they reminded me of the airs of a hospital ward.

And not for nothing, either! All the tiresome latent illnesses have a way of raising their heads in this season. Lady Violet has toothache—backache—or what not—"Oh, it's just the spring!" I tell her cheerily, and she flies at once to sulphur tabloids. Why should the poets' spring test the purity of our blood so severely and represent such a strain on the nerves?

I am convinced that no creature who possesses more than an elementary memory can enjoy the spring. Lady Violet pretends to, Perry really does, but I can't stand the waves of recollection that are carried with the smell of the wild currant bushes, or endure the poignant associations of scented night-flowering stocks. To the old stagers of life, the year seems to progress after the fashion of a motor, by a succession of shocks. I have suffered more than twenty springs *manqué*, remember.

The garden was deserted. They were all playing bridge in the lighted drawing-room. I ought to have gone in, for my headache was lessening, but I could not oblige myself to do so. I was enjoying myself sadly. I had only a dressing-gown on and a little shawl over my head, Scotch fashion. But there was nobody there.

Yes, there was! A red spot that must be the

light of some one's cigar came in my direction. I had embarked on an alley which had no side issue, and my slow paces must inevitably bring me face to face with the man who was smoking—Colonel Lisbon—who came up to me, with the hand that held the cigarette gracefully extended behind him.

"How are you, Miss Courtenay? I was most anxious to hear, and no one could tell me. It was I who carried you in, you know."

"No, I did not know," I replied. "Thank you very much." My pink dressing-gown troubled me.

"But, tell me, are you better?"

"Yes, much."

"That's a dreadful old woman, that Lady Violet!"

"Oh, hush!" I said, though I can't see that I owe Lady Violet any loyalty; "and—I think I must go in now." Would he know it was a dressing-gown?

"I say, don't let me drive you out of the garden!" he said quickly. "I ought to be in at bridge, but the fact is I am fairly cleaned out." He knocked the ashes off his cigar against the balustrade of the terrace, and looked rather sad and grim. "I suppose," he continued, "that you are more or less in the same boat, or you wouldn't do what you do. She's a bit of a bully——"

"My—Lady Violet is no worse than any one else would be, except she is a woman. Women always bully the creature they pay."

"Poor child, how bitterly you speak!" he murmured, and the common phrase of male patronage was pleasant to me from his lips, though, of course, he had no right to use it on such a very slight acquaintance. I don't suppose he would have done so to any one but a girl in my position; no, he wouldn't have dared to speak so casually to a woman who was staying in the house "on her own"! Companions cannot be choosers of phrases. Personally, I am afraid I should not have stood it from any one else—any one who was less good-looking, though I don't know that that is any reason.

"What did you have for dinner?" he asked me suddenly. "Up in your own room, I suppose."

"Nothing. I didn't have it anywhere."

"Oh, that was bad," he said, like any old grandmother. "Can you point me out the larder window?"

"I could not eat anything—not now—not even if you stole it for me."

"A bit upset still, eh? Take my arm and walk round with me a little. Let us go and see the fountain that made all the mischief. It looks like what Sodom and Gomorrah must have looked like, I should think."

"I've only got a——"

"—Intimate garment of sorts on. That does not matter, I won't look at you. You look rather like the women in the place I have come from."

"Where's that?"

"Chili. Been a whole year there, digging in the nitrate fields."

"Then you were really working," said I.

"Why, yes, of course. Does that surprise you?"

He was not a mere fortune-hunter, then! I said aloud: "No, but it seems to me that in this world it is the women who do all the work. Men just stand about and look for it."

"That is the hardest job of the two," he rejoined. "*You* get it without looking for it. But, as a matter of fact, you women stand in your own light. You bag all the work, and then wonder why we are too poor to marry you. My life is spent in looking for something to do. I am that deplorable being, a younger son. I tried being agent once for my cousin, Lord Lyminge—I had a taste of your sort of life in those days, and I simply couldn't stand it. Old Frank took it out of me. I declined to do a dog's work on a dog's wages. Women are more pliable—adaptable—what? Lady Violet is a sort of relation of yours, isn't she? I say—you're not getting cold, are you?—can you tell me what that young fellow Livingston does for a living?"

"I believe he's got a living ready made."

"Good Lord! And he looks a luxurious, effeminate sort of chap. Do you think he has any chance?"

"Chance? Of what?" I asked, though indeed I knew. The very air of Hardman Hall is infectious.

"Of being in a position to invite us all down here to stay with him some day. He is obviously making the running all he knows with old Hardman."

"I don't agree with you. Of all the people here, he seems to me the least of a toady."

"You might have excepted your humble servant," said my new friend; "but then you happen to know I am quite out of it. Lyminge brought me over here from Honsham Court to see the old boy, and we got playing billiards, and he liked my game and asked me down here on my own account. I fancy the life here, it is so free and easy; one can do exactly as one likes."

"Yes," I rejoined bitterly. My head began to ache again just then. "It is nice to be independent—to be asked for one's own sake, and not as a mere appendage."

"You must not kick against the pricks, my little friend—if I may call you so? You must forgive me, if I am cheeky. I have lived for years in out-of-the-way places, and not met a respectable woman from one year's end to the other. Did you ever hear of Kloochmen? Women? Did you guess? Rolling stones never have time to acquire manners, you see, for as soon as they get hold of the conventions of one place, they move on to somewhere where they are entirely different. I always speak as I feel."

"That is probably why Mr Hardman likes you so much," said I. "He loves frankness."

"Did he say so?" asked my new friend hastily, adding softly: "And do you?"

"Yes, if it is natural."

"You must be a Scotchwoman. Only Scotchwomen have that curious grudging charm. . . . You refuse to quite open your mouth when you smile, you make a futile attempt to close it in the middle which is most fascinating. You speak with your face a little piquantly turned away——"

"I really must go in now."

"But promise me that you will eat something."

"Yes, I will eat the plateful of cold pudding that Mrs Mason brought up to my room an hour or so ago."

"Sweets to the sweet," said he, laughing. "A cold sweet, too—and that is exactly what you are——"

I don't think I was meant to hear that last sentence. Luckily, I had already turned away. As I munched the cold pudding and slowly and wearily put myself to bed — that little wretch Margot never came near me—I wondered if the way Colonel Lisbon had talked to me represented his manner to other women—women in a better position than mine? I don't believe any girl, bred and brought up under the kindly influences of an assured social status, can understand the bitterness of the problem presented to poor Carrie Courtenay, as she lay and turned and tossed, and failed to find sleep.

## CHAPTER VII

I RESUMED my duties next day. I assisted Lady Violet to dress—an agonising, contradictious three-quarters of an hour—and meekly followed her down the carven staircase to breakfast. Colonel Lisbon met us coming up. Knowing that a question as to my health was on his tongue, I willed him not to ask it—successfully. It would only have irritated Lady Violet. She was in a good temper that morning. She said, as she watched his diamonded stockings round the corner:

"That man with the good calves has beautiful eyes, too."

This was in the morning-room after breakfast. He had, I confess, looked at me once or twice during the meal, and Lady Violet had coquettishly smoothed out the lappets of her dress. I always gave her lappets. I arranged her clothes, and they were suitable to her age, and she really looked very well for an old lady, barring the too juvenile wig, which was none of my contriving.

All day long I thought of the evening, and hoped—yes, actually hoped—to have a headache again. Then, if Colonel Lisbon was still afraid

of playing, and Fidgie had to have her evening walk——

At dinner a squat little boy sat next me, a recent importation and addition to the list of possible heirs. He was, I was told, the son of our host's cousin. He had been invited here to plague the clerical couple, and, if possible, add to the general sense of uneasiness. The boy appeared shy. He said nothing, but consumed largely. About half-way through dinner I raised my arm to pass a tray of salted almonds to my neighbour, whereupon the little fiend tweaked me unmercifully in the fleshy under-part of my arm. I squeaked, in irrepressible annoyance, so did he, in malicious glee. I got red all over, and Lady Violet glared at me as if I were the person in fault. Colonel Lisbon never looked at me, but I caught sight of him after dinner having a word with that lad in the hall among the sticks and cloaks.

Nobody seemed to care for bridge that night, and Mr Hardman chose to have some music. Lady Violet, who hated music, asked for her game of bézique. I could not refuse, of course, but oh, the torture of prolonged attention to a game that possesses none of the elements of interest belonging to a game of skill! Lady Violet's dry recurrent exclamation, "Marriage to count!" got on my nerves for the first time. In the midst of my trials I saw Colonel Lisbon get up and go out of the room. He made me no sign, which was

tactful, for if he had, I should not have been able to follow him. It would have been *too* marked. I was not so far gone as that.

"Has Fidgie had her evening run?" asked Lady Violet suddenly.

"I don't think she has," said I. It was about the first lie I had ever told in my life—since my childish years, at any rate.

"How tiresome of you to forget! You must take her now, at once. . . . I never saw any one who hated taking the slightest trouble for others as you do, Caroline. You should just see your face!"

I could not, of course, see my face, but if an expression of insane joy can be construed into one of acute boredom, that is the feat which the purblind old woman was evidently performing. I rose languidly, schooled by a by no means new-born sense of diplomacy, only so far I had used it chiefly in the avoiding of rows and what not. I was thoroughly ashamed of myself, and yet quite determined to persist in this intrigue or flirtation, or whatever it is to be called. My whole character seemed to be altering. I left the room and went upstairs and gathered up Fidgie, who had been aired and put to bed hours ago.

She naturally rebelled at being taken out of her warm, satin-cushioned basket for a chilly walk in the damp garden, but I did not allow myself to be deterred by her cross grunts and recalcitrant limbs, and firmly carried her down

and out by a side door, where I emptied her out on to the garden walk, a sleepy, shapeless, indisposed bundle. She waddled unwillingly along the gravel after me, and I—I walked straight into the arms of the man who came neither too slowly nor too hastily, as his style was, to meet me. I will attempt no explanation—no palliation. I was punished enough afterwards.

He said in a low voice: "I knew quite well you would come to me. It is Fate."

I was grateful to him for bringing in Fate. He kissed me, then he put me away.

"Stop," he said. "I must speak first. I know you are not a flirt. Can you ever care for me as your husband, Carrie? Do you by any chance care for me at all? I ventured to *think* you did. No, I mean, I felt it; I am not a vain man. I am certain that I care for you desperately. It has been very sudden—I can't help it. I am a fool. I am worse, I am a pauper. It prevents my daring to offer to marry you——"

"For the present," I said, and then wished I had not been so very business-like. But he took it nicely.

"For the present. You are right. I said you were a Scotchwoman! But it need not prevent me from contemplating it—some day, in the near future. Well, then, Carrie, shall we leave it there? Can you trust me?"

"To come back and marry me when you have made your fortune? Yes, if you still care for me. If you should have left off caring by then, I should

not want you to come back. That is the way I look at it."

"And a deuced sensible way, too! Carrie, you are simply adorable. If there were more women like you, we should have fewer matrimonial muddles. And now tell me, are we to make this wonderful fact public?"

"If Lady Violet knew, she would not keep me a moment."

"But——"

"And I think, that if you are poor and I am poor, I had surely better go on earning money up to the very last moment."

"Carrie, how wise you are! You justify my rash act in my own eyes, for surely two such inherently sensible people are bound to get through somehow. But tell me—if Lady Violet is not to know, how are we to meet?"

"You must make friends with Lady Violet. She is not so bad when you know her, and she perfectly loves men, so she will make you free of the house. Arrange that she asks you to come and call in Dampier Square. I see no other way of doing it."

"Won't that be rather mean? A man doesn't like——"

"What are called woman's tortuous ways—I know. But we have to be diplomatic. Besides, if you don't—make love to me——"

"On the premises! You mean I must never kiss you behind the door, if I get a chance?"

"You will never get a chance. Lady Violet has eyes at the back of her head, and—I am not the kissing sort, I think."

"You think! That is good. My dear, believe me, you are not more averse to kisses than any other woman when it comes to the point. At least, I hope not."

"Maybe; but I have a day out every fortnight, anyhow——"

"Like a dear little servant. Well, well, we must try to modify these conventions. We shall manage all right, I fancy. Perhaps, who knows? we shall be sooner out of the wood than we expect. Something may turn up. I think I shall begin to be very civil to old Ralph, and cut these other people out. It's a fair field and no favour. He was a self-made man, you know; there is no family name or tradition to keep up. That malapert boy is only a cousin. By the way, I chastised him well for his rudeness to you. It made my blood boil to see how little they all made of it. You took it so prettily——"

"I don't think any one in this house has the slightest chance of getting Mr Hardman's money," said I.

"Don't you? Well, I think the pink baby has rather a good chance. He doesn't care a damn, or *seems* not to, and that gives him a pull. . . . I say, they are making a move in there. I hear the noise of chairs being pushed back. You must

escape. Good night, darling. I am glad I have been a damned fool; are you?"

I was off, and had no need to answer; but I was not offended, for, of course, the man who proposes to a penniless woman is more or less of a fool. Less, however, in my case, for I can work and he can—look for work!

You see, I already know the kind of man he is, although I love him. He is the kind of man that the busy-bee sort of woman *I* am, always stumbles on. Jehane's philosophy! Well, well, women must work and men must — play, I suppose. It's the rule all the world over, and what are women, that we should complain of it?

## CHAPTER VIII

"I HAVE asked Colonel Lisbon to call," Lady Violet announced to me in the train going home.

"Have you? He seems pleasant," I returned.

It would not have done to express less interest about any prospective visitor of Lady Violet's, and I dared not express more. She was always lying in wait to snub me. What was Colonel Lisbon, her new broom, to Caroline Courtenay? What, indeed! And though this new broom happened to have a peculiar interest for me, I had seen so many of them adopted, voted indispensable, and then thrown aside as useless. Lady Violet, like most bores, was easily bored. I have noticed that the dull person who contributes nothing, is always the most *exigeant* and eager to be entertained. But Colonel Lisbon, having in this case a fairly strong incentive to secure Lady Violet's good graces, was not likely to get himself dropped. Beyond the possible attraction of myself, there was another: we keep an excellent cook. Lady Violet sometimes says: "Caroline, what will you do when I die, for I have distinctly unfitted you for suburban cookery."

Now, Colonel Lisbon is a gastronome. I have noticed that.

I was now as happy as it was in my nature to be, and meant to do my duty both by my lover and my employer. That is to say, I did not mean to use Lady Violet's house for an intrigue, for that is exactly what it would be, so long as he forbade me to tell her of our engagement. There were to be no hole-and-corner assignations, no furtive hand-clasps in the intervals of my service, no embracing behind doors and last words on the hall mat. He could, if he chose, take me out once a fortnight at one of the Bond Street tea places. According to this arrangement, he would never be able to kiss me, but I fancied he would feel this privation more than I should. Margot is right. Perhaps that instinct has been starved out of me.

He has told me that the moment he came back from Hardman Hall he was engaged to go off on a yachting expedition with Lord Lyminge. It was to be a fortnight's trip, or even a three weeks one, so on my first free afternoon after our return, I went to my club.

I had once in my life written an article, which Jehane Bruce foisted into a magazine in order to render me eligible for the delightfully convenient club, of which she herself was a full-blown member and committee woman. Once having stormed this fastness of literature, however, I was wise enough to desist from the art which had

procured my entrance there, and simply enjoyed the privileges of cheapness and light which this particular club combines. Lady Violet is ignorant of the fact of my membership.

I found Jehane Bruce eating a good square meal of tea and steak in the coffee-room. While she ate, she read. Her newspaper was propped up against the teapot.

"That will all turn to leather inside you," I remarked.

"Yes; I have heard that theory, but this is regular journalist's grub, you know. I suppose we *are* a trifle leathery and tough. Can't be helped. I have been obliged to run all my meals into one to-day. Been out since ten, reporting. Blowminster wedding, you know. Regular *roman à clef* occasion. Public deeply interested. At seven o'clock to-night I mean to incurt into the domestic meal of the bereaved parents, and see if I can find out where Lady Crail has gone for her third honeymoon. It has been kept a dead secret, you know."

"But, Jehane, will they ever let you in? There's many a slip between the doorstep and ——"

"And the par', eh? Only the tip, after all. *Delordace delordace delordace* is my motto. I shall use it for all it's worth. Sit down, you pampered minion of the aristocracy, and have your tea, if you don't mind the smell of steak with it. Have you seen your brother Perry lately?"

"No; anything new?"

"No—stale old story. He has jilted Desdemona Cresswell, so she says."

"Only Desdemona would use such an old-fashioned word. The Jilt. It takes one back to Whyte Melville. Well, it will be no use her producing his love-letters in court, for dear Perry writes so vilely that no judge will be able to tell whether they are love-letters or not."

"Carrie, you are always so spiteful when Perry is concerned. You fight his battles like a jealous woman. Nothing is bad enough for the girl he takes on. Now I am sorry for her, especially as her old deaf uncle has died and her home broken up, and she can't settle to anything, and is gone quite thin. I have offered her to pal up with me for a bit—share my flat and halve the rent. It's only twelve and six a week. I am poor and lonely since they won't let me keep my Chow any more."

"A girl who has had a love disappointment won't be company; moreover, she will have an enormous appetite."

"Oh, I'll give her porridge; it is very stodging. Louy makes it with not more than a dozen lumps to the square inch. And Louy's batter puddings! Solid mahogany! Firm as old Albion's battered rocks. I can eat anything—grass of the field, even, like Nebuchadnezzar. It'll do Desdemona good to rough it a little; but still, you might write to your precious Don Juan of an adorable brother and scold him."

"For giving Desdemona Cresswell the opportunity of playing the martyr and enjoying Louy's batter puddings. Don't you see that she is Perry's match? They both seem to have time to play at the game they both love, but they are not really lovers, because neither of them are serious. To establish that position, it seems to me that one of them, at least, must be in earnest. One of them must be like the frogs in the story, if the other is to be like the boys. Then things begin to hum, as soon as either of the parties can be made to suffer."

"Fancy, Carrie, you a lecturer on love! I thought you never had time to think of those things any more than I have. Hard work drives love to the wall. I have often thought that we working women grow like men in that respect, stolid and unenterprising, and take love as a *Cottar's Saturday Night* affair merely. But, as a matter of fact, the relations of a woman to a man are not nearly so important as the relations of a woman to her paper—or papers, for she can be a pluralist, too, at that game. My ideal is to be married—that is, to write for—all the papers in London."

"There's a journalist's dream for you! I hope, dear, you will pull it off," I said; then, growing sententious: "But remember that the conditions on which those alliances are best maintained is that the parties conduct all their amours by letter.

An editor should never see his contributor, then he adores her."

"Tut, tut, Carrie, my dear, you know nothing about it! Editors are timid things, and can be taken by storm like any one else. If I dress myself becomingly, and go and take my manuscript in myself, ten to one the poor, wee, timorous, shivering beastie dare not say No! to so much dashing assurance, but simply accepts one's stuff just to get one out of the place and be able to call his office his own again. I know my own business. I have taken them all ways now, and I am proud to say that I am at the present moment on the staff of eight papers—five weeklies and three dailies. That's something! I say, Carrie, do you remember my New Year's Eve party?"

"Rather! The one bright spot in an unchequered winter!"

"Mariuscha made a good haul then—by keeping quiet mostly, that's her method. She has taken on two of my men—I mean, two men whose acquaintance she made that night, and I meet them on the stairs nearly every day looking bashful, because, after all, they only knew her through me, and they never trouble to call on me. Her flat simply reeks of smoke. The landlord hardly thinks it respectable!" She laughed. "One man is Herbert Langshire, the man Margot muffed so stupidly, or, rather, she says her mother did—and the other——"

"I know. I met him in a country house. Somebody I know calls him the pink baby."

"Who *do* you know, Carrie? You look quite conscious. But, really, how do you think Mariuscha makes the money to pay for that nice flat? It has a couple more rooms than mine, and she keeps a real cook."

"Doesn't she do anything?"

"So little now for Leadham, M.P., that it isn't worth talking about. She is at home all day, smoking, and dressed like a princess. I say, Carrie, aren't we getting rather nasty about her? She's a fellow-worker after all."

That was so like the good Jehane. She enjoyed gossip as much as anybody, but scrupled to discount any pal's market value by indulging in it. Neither did I wish to interfere with Mariuscha's plans, so I changed the subject.

But if Mason had spoken true, one wondered if Miss Lancaster had thought it worth while to inform her two suitors of the provenance of the comfortable flat, and would they approve if they knew of the source of their lady-love's income?

I heard more of the Lancasters next day at tea, when Mrs Iver Leadham called. She is my friend, but I hardly raised my voice during her call. It was ostensibly paid to Lady Violet to please me and ameliorate my condition, as having indirectly procured this satisfaction for my mistress. Mrs Leadham is a person of great social importance. She is, moreover, a kind, hasty, romantic woman,

who loves to start from her sphere and study the way the poor and unconnected live. The worse off you are, the less favoured by fortune, the more interest she takes in you. I have seen her in silks and satins and all the signs of wealth, driving about with the most pronounced dowds, and in earnest converse with the shabbiest person in the room at meetings or bazaars. Lady Violet notices and deplores this fault in her.

After the usual social preliminaries, "I have got a new governess," she announced, confident of our interest—"a little grey-eyed thing, who dresses to her eyes, in grey with silver buttons—doesn't it describe her? She hasn't the ghost of a certificate, but *so* interesting! Her family have come to grief: she had the kind of improvident father that dies and floods the world with uncertificated governesses. She can only come to me in the mornings; she has to look after her mother. There is another sister, I hear, a selfish young lady, who lives her own life *à la* Ibsen, and shirks her responsibilities. The world is so small — she actually does a little secretarying for my husband, Michelle tells me—so little that he has never spoken to me about her."

"How interesting!" murmured Lady Violet, who wasn't a bit entertained. She has decent manners, though, so Mrs Leadham was able to go on working out her little plot out loud.

"You see," she went on, "I make myself quite a little story out of it all. The other girl is like

the selfish elder sister in Grimm's tales. I hear she is beautiful, and lives in chambers all by herself. She does that sooner than take her turn of playing bezique with the old lady. They would be richer if she lived with them and put all their incomes together. It is like a novel, isn't it? Michelle is pretty, too. Herbert, my husband's brother, says so, and he is a judge. I sent him down to the schoolroom with a message the other day, and he said she only wanted feeding up, and champagne; so one night when he was with us, I asked her to dine, but she refused, poor child, because she couldn't leave her mother."

"Well, she won't have that inconvenient relation for ever, presumably," said Lady Violet with venom.

"I only asked for one little evening out of three hundred and sixty-five. Am I boring you, dear Lady Violet? These workaday women interest me so deeply, I am apt to forget that other people may not share my feeling about them."

"They are generally designing frauds," said Lady Violet. "There is one creature of that sort I heard of, who has just lately wormed herself straight into the heart of a rich old widower."

"Has he married her?" asked Mrs Leadham, beaming all over with philanthropic smiles.

"No, not quite so bad as that, only left her his money. I daresay it can be set aside by the right people."

"Oh, but what a pity that would be! I like a

romance. But about my little *protégée*—I took Herbert to call on the Lancasters. The mother is deaf and a bit of a bore, certainly, but very handsome and decorative, and Herbert has a passion for old ladies, we always tell him. He cleverly admitted to a mad devotion for bezique, and asked if he might come and play with her one evening—say, Monday. That was the night I proposed Michelle should dine with me. The carriage was to bring Herbert and fetch Michelle away. The old lady might dine at half-past six as usual. Herbert could get back to dinner at half-past eight with us. Do you see? It gave me such pleasure to watch the girl's face. She got as pink as a hedge rose, and didn't know how to say no. The old lady, as usual, was not proof against the persuasions of a handsome young man. She would not hear of her daughter's refusing the invitation. It will be next Monday."

They spoke of other things. They actually mentioned Colonel Lisbon: London is small. How I longed for the door to open and to hear Staples announce him. That was the way it would happen, and it might happen any day now. Then I should meekly give him tea, and keep Fidgie from annoying him—he hates animals —and he would throw me, perhaps, three words, as many as might pass unnoticed by Lady Violet, and he would look at me now and then. I hoped he would write to warn me of his coming. I thought I should like to do my hair "big" for

the occasion, or a little bigger than usual, and trust to Providence not to permit Lady Violet to notice it.

"What an intensely selfish woman that is!" observed my mistress, when the door had closed on Mrs Leadham. "Boring me with her working-woman anecdotes and misplaced philanthropy the whole afternoon! The next thing will be, she will have her precious brother *marrying* the governess, and where will she be then? Fancy having a person you've been used to order about all over the place, for a sister-in-law!"

## CHAPTER IX

On Saturday afternoon I chose to go and pay my call on Mrs Lancaster, late, so as to follow the working of Mrs Leadham's little plot. To retard the hour of my visit somewhat I went to the club first and met Jehane.

"Well, how goes it? How is the P.G., otherwise the pig that pays the rent?" I asked.

"It's a morbid P.I.G., and wants frills to its sheets and clean towels every day. Preposterous!"

"Come, come, Jehane; you are too sincere to put on frills, I know, but how often do you give her clean towels?"

"Once a week, if I remember; but I haven't got a clear half-dozen of anything, and some of the old ones have got made into chair-backs. I told her to take an antimacassar to dry her face with the other day, and you should have seen that face! I can quite understand a man finding her out before he had exactly said the word that splices, as I understand your brother did."

"Perry behaved very badly, I am sure."

"So she says."

"Has she made a clean breast of it to you?"

"She's all clean breast and confidence *ad nauseam*," said poor Jehane. "She comes into my bedroom whenever I am washing my face——"

"Oh, if she doesn't pester you oftener than that——"

"Be quiet, Carrie! One ought not to be always washing one's face; it roughens it. I tell you she comes and sits on the foot of my bed—which is off, by the way—to tell me something important that she had left out in her account of such and such a day's events. When she isn't splortching out confidences, she is sitting mum and glum on an ottoman. You know my ottomans are all rather low and very hard, for they are made out of old packing-cases, but she looks all the time as if she were saying, like Queen Bloody Mary, 'Low, low, not low enough for me.' Sometimes she sticks her head in her hands and doesn't move for half an hour. I have to shake her same as an opium patient, and then she complains I put her shoulder out. Then she fiddles with her food and picks at it, and leaves bits, especially fat. She says she can't help it if she's dainty—*I* call it greedy."

"How *does* your food come in?"

"Quite nicely, on two covered plates from the cook-shop down below; but she makes faces and averts her gaze, and, while she is making up her mind to tackle it, the fat all turns to grease on her plate, of course."

"She can't possibly eat fat when she is in love, Jehane! No one could!"

"Why is she such a cur to be still in love after such a very plain hint to leave off! Now, I have no sentiment, but I have lots of pride. People haven't wanted to marry me much—there was an old gentleman once when I was sixteen—so I just gave up the whole harassing emotional business and settled down peaceably to be an old maid. I daresay I have saved dozens of men's lives like that, by not worrying them. And look at my own even brow! I never give the inferior sex a thought from one year's end to another. I bless my one or two grey hairs that keep the men away. I can support myself, no fear!"

"Yes, but one can't go on doing that for ever. That is the worst of being independent, I think. Sooner or later, when you begin to weaken and get odious feminine illnesses, you want what is called a man's strong arm——"

"Tscha! You seem a little infected, Carrie, with this wretched femininity! When I get to that, I'll go to the workhouse. The only grievance there, it appears, is hard seats and being separated from the other sex; and after my own ottomans and the way I feel about men, neither of those worries will affect me. I say, do you mind me talking with my mouth full? I have to do all my stoking, as usual, in ten minutes."

"Poor Jehane! Always in a hurry, always off to report somebody or something, to bully

an editor or protect a comrade. Wet feet and headaches! I wonder you haven't got your feminine illness long ago. Where have you left Desdemona?"

"At home. She never goes out now. We did lunch together in the middle of the day, and she agreed to make her own tea. It is all laid handy in the cupboard, and the milkman hangs the can on the door handle, if she only had the sense to go and look for it. Louy has taken her afternoon out. She's got a lover as small as herself. Why don't you go and look Desdemona up? It would be kind to her, and then you can form a clear idea of what your poor friend has to suffer. From the deserted ones of this earth, the Lord deliver us!"

I took her advice. Miss Cresswell opened the door to me.

"Oh, come in; or did you want Jehane? She is out, but I'm in. The slavey's out for the day. They *will* have their day out, no matter how it bothers you. I wonder if I can manage to make you a cup of tea?" She looked infinitely distressed.

"Never mind about tea. I will come in and talk to you," I said, gazing covertly at the earthy shade of Desdemona's complexion, and feeling every inch the sister of Perry and a brute. I knew, too, that her cordiality was the result of her consideration of me in the light of that relationship. Perry ought not really to make any woman look like

that—but, a moment, were her looks the result of Perry's unkindness, or Jehane's housekeeping? I set myself to find out.

"How old is Louy?" I asked.

"Only fifteen, poor little object."

"Fifteen! She doesn't look big enough to turn a mattress."

"She doesn't turn any mattresses," said Desdemona sadly. "One doesn't expect any refinements of civilisation here. Jehane likes to pig along anyhow, and, of course, I have to pig along, too. I am too spiritless to chafe, or leave, or try to ameliorate my lot in any way."

"Perhaps Jehane turns her own mattress every morning?"

"I expect she does, if she cares about having it done, which I should think highly improbable. I leave everything to Louy, such as she is. She is here for the purpose. If Jehane chooses to employ a mere child in defiance of the Factories Act, it isn't my business. I don't seem to care about anything."

"In that state, other people's concerns are naturally the first to go to the wall," I said unkindly. She did not hear, for she was hunting in the cupboard for something. A pat of ravaged-looking butter came out, and a loaf. Desdemona, in her delicate mauve muslin, with manicured finger-nails, handled it as if it were pitch.

"The bread is three days old, as usual," she said; "and need we cut bread and butter? I shall

be sure to cut myself, for I don't know how—never done it in my life. One has to hold the bread against one's chest and cut *to* one, hasn't one? There is some milk at the door, perhaps. It depends on the caprice of the milk-boy."

"Oh, I am rather a fatalist about that," said I. "I am certain it is there. I'll go and see."

"Wait and help me to put the kettle on first," implored Desdemona. "I hate the sight of lurid taps and sinks, but it definitely needs filling, I am afraid, before we can use it."

It ended in my fetching the milk, and filling the kettle, and cutting the bread and butter, Desdemona watching me the while with lack-lustre eyes, and making ineffectual conventional protests. Then we went into the sitting-room, and I was about to sit down when she interposed:

"Don't sit on that chair, it isn't safe—or on that—or on that. This ottoman is safest, though hardest. Oh, how I hate these old Turkish atrocities spread over everything, covering heaven knows what!"

"Are there——"

"No. No beasts that I know of. But it's only by the mercy of God, for nobody ever dusts here, or brooms. Louy hasn't time."

"Why don't *you* have a go at it? It is very good for the figure."

"I consider," said Desdemona, drawing herself up, "that if I pay the rent, that is properly all my share, and a very good share, too. I, at least,

expect to be kept for that in table linen and food, though I can't sleep or eat." She made a wry face.

"Can't Louy cook?"

"She isn't even asked to. Two thick, reeking platefuls of unmentionable provender came for us from the shop at the bottom there. By the time they have got upstairs, the whole thing has turned to grease, the meat and the potatoes indistinguishable. And onions—Jehane likes onions! She says they induce longevity. Who wants longevity? At least, a life like this!" She began to cry, weakly, irritatingly, pathetically. I felt I *must* speak to Perry. She was thinking of Perry, too, for she burst out: "If *he* were to see me now!"

"Look here, I'm his sister after all, and I will send him to see you, Miss Cresswell."

"Call me Desdemona," she wailed. "You are a darling, and much nicer than Perry. If women would only see it. I think I shall end as a man-hater, like Jehane. Tell me, do you think he *would* come?"

"He might, if I drew a moving picture of you in your present melancholy condition. A queen in a novel, the lady in Comus, the princess in Hans Christian Andersen. Only buck up, and don't mope so openly, and make poor Jehane miserable."

"She is so cross and obstinate."

"She can't help it, you know, if she is less fastidious than you. It helps her to bear her hard, lonely life. She would have gone under long ago if she had minded pin-pricks and peas in her

mattress, and so on. She has enormous pluck, and I have the greatest respect for her, though I do think she might manage to cast her lines in cleaner places, if not pleasanter. Anyway, it's cheap for you living with her, and you can call it marking time till something better turns up. Now, good-bye, dear, I must go down and ask after old Mrs Lancaster."

"Mich' is actually going out to dinner. It is quite an event," said poor Desdemona, trying hard to take an interest in her fellow-woman, by way of improving her position in my good graces. "Good-bye, angel."

Michelle had gone away to dress when I went in. Old Mrs Lancaster was in a pleased fuss. She had not seen her daughter in a low dress since that day when Mr Lancaster came back from the city and told them that they had lost all their money. Her cap-strings—beautifully got up by Mich', of course—flittered on her shoulders.

Michelle was evidently taking great pains with her attire. Long before she was ready the door opened, and Mr Langshire was shown in, stiff, smiling—a little district-visitorish in manner, it must be owned. The carriage was below, he announced, waiting for Miss Lancaster, and he hoped to have the pleasure of escorting her down the hundred granite stairs before beginning his game of bezique with her mother.

Michelle, when she finally appeared, was hermetically sealed and wrapped up in a Shetland shawl

which her fond mother naturally insisted on her doffing. With many blushes, she complied, and I must say that she was very pretty and her skin very white. I wondered if that was because it had been so well covered up all these years.

Mr Langshire took her downstairs. He was obviously, to me, who knew his shy, emotion-burrowing ways, a good deal *épris*. Was Michelle going to accomplish what Margot Bligh, and her own sister, and countless others had failed to do? The charming thing about it to me was that such an idea evidently never crossed the old lady's mind. It was plain that she was not a good matchmaker, hadn't the rudiments of it, and that's about the best way to manage things, after all.

In about five minutes Mr Langshire came upstairs again, looking red and conscious. The king had stooped to the beggar maid—contemplated stooping still further! That is the way I interpreted his glance. The game at cards was now to begin. The green baize table was brought forward. I helped, and was just going to take my leave, thinking the play played out, when I heard a loud rat-tat at the outer door, and the little out-at-heels-and-elbows maid scuttling from her adjacent kitchen to answer it.

"Company?" I heard Mariuscha's deep voice in the tiny hall, mimicking the slavey. "What do you mean?"

Then she appeared like a handsome black

tornado on the threshold, lugging in a large dress-box.

"Where's Mich'? I want her at once—to mend a tear in the dress I'm going to wear at the Journalists'. How are you, Carrie? Are you ill, mum? Have you got the doctor?"

For Herbert Langshire, standing decorously at the window, had, with praiseworthy equanimity, not turned round at her entry. I stared at Mariuscha with the glare of extreme interest and some elation. It was a good scene.

"Where's Mich'? I want Mich'," repeated Mariuscha, it must be confessed, in no gentle tones. "Can't somebody speak?"

"Mich' is dining out," said Mrs Lancaster. "Don't bluster, dear, but say How do you do to Mr Langshire."

"Bluster! Mich'! Gone out to dinner!" was all Mariuscha seemed able to say. Her forehead was disagreeably corrugated with the shadows of the lines she would get there when she was old. In a moment she collected herself, and said bitterly: "How do you do, Herbert? I mistook your back. No, I won't be able to see you later in my flat, because I am just going out. Thanks, don't trouble to see me down. I will go so far with Carrie."

"Fancy Mich' playing me such a trick!" she said to me, as we went downstairs. There were no men present, she did not drawl now. "I wouldn't have believed it. And Herbert—solemn idiot! What was he doing with mother? What is it all

about? What have they all been plotting against me?"

"They are not plotting against you; they are only plotting to give your sister a little amusement. Mrs Iver Leadham—— Mich' is dining there to-night."

"Mrs Iver Leadham? I am her husband's secretary! She has never asked me to her house in her life. I say, it's pretty hard. One may slave away for years in a man's office and his family not take the slightest notice of one, and suddenly one's dull little sister, who lives at home, and has nothing whatever to do with them, steps calmly into your place, and gets the best of everything."

"But I thought your sister was governess to her children?"

"So she is. I quite forgot," said Mariuscha, with her brilliant, frosty smile, as we crossed the cold hall and went out into the night air together. Her voice was quite different, and she had resumed her drawl, as she remarked airily: "*Comme ca ce trouve.* After all, all things considered, I had just as soon Mich' took Herbert off my hands. He was getting tiresome."

"Wanting to paw you, do you mean? Women generally mean that by a man's being 'tiresome,'" I asked. Both so cold! I couldn't imagine—— But Mariuscha evaded curiosity, as usual.

"There are many other ways — for a man — of being tiresome to a woman like me," she

replied guardedly. "I simply haven't time for Herbert."

"I notice you call him by his Christian name."

"He begged me to—once. Well, never mind. It will come easier to me when I am his sister-in-law."

## CHAPTER X

I KEPT my promise to Desdemona, and wrote a sisterly letter, that is to say, a drastic and tactless one, to Perry. Ill-judged communications of this kind have usually no effect, so I was a little surprised when, a week later, Perry came in and called on me. It was Lady Violet's "day" at home. Perry is good-looking, and is on intimate terms with one and a half duchesses, so Lady Violet could have no objection to his presence in her drawing-room on that sacred day. Other people called early and before tea-time, so I got a fair amount of conversation with my brother. I tried to talk to him of Desdemona, but he would only talk of Jehane.

"A splendid creature, that Miss Bruce," repeated Perry, *ad nauseam*. "Self-reliant, practical, sensible, no nonsense about her. It is a shame that a fine girl and potential mother like that, should have to work hard for her living! Why doesn't some man marry her, and take her out of it?"

"Well, Perry dear, if you are so keen on her being married——"

"I said a man, not a beggar, Carrie! But, I

tell you, Miss Jehane would be a beauty if she were smartened up a bit. Such eyes! Such a figure, but no justice done it, of course. Such hair—I made her a hat the other day with these hands, and it suited her to a 't.' But she is ruining her beautiful eyes with typewriting—it is a horrid shame."

"Typing doesn't injure the eyes particularly. Crying is far worse."

"Jehane never cries, you bet."

"No, but Desdemona does," said I, rushing her in.

"Yes. When I first met Desdy, she was crying for sheer tiredness and cussedness combined, sitting on the gangway of those cheap four-shilling seats at the opera. She had been at work all day in some office or other—hunted, worried, slave-driven——"

"Well, when her work was done, why didn't she go home to bed, instead of spending her money on a hard wooden seat that she couldn't enjoy?"

"You're as hard as that seat, Carrie. After all, the girl was young—if anæmic—she had to have her share of the pleasures, not to mention the emotions, of life. I 'poor-poored' her, and we became friends. I am the sworn knight of the working woman——"

"But there isn't room for all their sleaves in your helmet."

"No, is there?" said Perry ingeniously. "They

seem to expect it, though. Anyway, I fight their battles for them, and listen to their potty little troubles, and sympathise with them, and lend them a fiver now and then. One gets queer bits of human nature that way, you know. There was little Flossie Trentham, who lived all by herself in one room for twopence halfpenny a year. A beast of a man—we're all beasts!—wanted to take her out to dinner, and goodness knows what beside, but the brave little kid wouldn't. She kept straight; but she has often told me of the awful revulsion of feeling she had, going home to her crust in a cupboard and her bare boards, and thinking of the lights of the Carlton, and the warmth of the cosy flat she had refused. It doesn't do to get so sorry for people as I do. It is apt to land one in tight places, and call out the dibs that are not always in one's waistcoat pocket."

"Yes, Perry. Then were you ever actually engaged to Desdemona?"

"No, Caroline. For what do you take me? I may be a brute, but I'm not a fool. Though she is far nicer than she used to be—contact with Jehane's larger nature has just about improved her."

I should have said something striking to Perry just then, if the door had not opened, and Staples announced with gusto—a new man!—"Colonel Lisbon!"

I only got this much said to my brother, "Has

*she* also given you leave to call her by her Christian name?" which was weak, and then, with my eyes downcast, I applied myself to giving my lover a cup of tea, after a perfunctory companion-like handshake. Then Lady Violet submerged him in society *on dits*, and Perry, referring to my remark, which had somehow by that time gone for me into the prehistoric plane, said:

"She lets me call her Jehane—yes. We are more like brother and sister—brother with two sisters, looks more like it. I can do what I choose with them both. I put in time to call there, most days——"

"Don't you find the stairs rather trying, dear?"

"Just nip up them like a two-year-old. It's nothing when I know there are two nice girls waiting for me on top. I took 'em both out to dinner the other day—real good champagne dinner at the new restaurant. They both starve themselves, I can tell you that. The working girl in London always does. It is quite serious. Women who live alone always end by eating slops and wearing teagowns. You need a man about to keep you women up to the mark. And Jehane looks simply ripping with a little colour in her cheeks."

"Never mind Jehane's colour! Do you see that man over there, talking to Lady Violet, Perry?"

"Man who's so becoming to you, eh?"

"What do you mean, silly?"

"Because since he came in, dear, you've had nearly as fine a colour as Jehane. Well, Carrie, he's a good-looking chap, if a little nutcrackery. Is he down on his luck, or so on?"

"I don't know. Does he strike you as out at elbows?"

"Oh, no, not he. Gentlemen of fortune never wear shabby coats."

"He's not a gentleman of fortune, as it happens."

"Ah, there, you see, you do know all about him. Well, dear, if your little affections are fixed on him, I'm sorry, for I can see the old lady won't give you a chance of a look in, unless I oppose my superior attractions to his. I'll go and take her off him. Give him some tea—a better cup than you gave me. He is a man, and not a brother—all the difference!"

Perry was as good as his word. Colonel Lisbon came over to me, but refused my offer of more tea. His eyes were searching my face, and gleaming in the old way, but his tongue spoke perforce in the language of commonplace.

"How have you been all this long time?" he said. "I have so often wondered. When our yacht lay in Arosa Bay, and the whole sea turned phosphorescent one evening, I was reminded of those funny little goldfish that were the occasion of our meeting" — here he dropped his voice skilfully — "and of your lying in my arms, Carrie."

"Hush! It was not the goldfish that made

me turn faint, but the smell of the tadpoles, if you remember. That, and the heat, the spring weather——"

"The sour, sweet spring, as you called it then. I remember. Ah, how it suited you! It was *you*, you, Carrie—the little touch of bitterness, like some rare fruit that is tart upon the tongue."

"What fruit is that, Colonel Lisbon, that you are telling Miss Courtenay about? Did you meet it on your travels?" interposed Lady Violet from the other end of the room. One man was not enough for her. Poor Perry looked snubbed, and at the same time made a face of sympathy with me.

"The mango, Lady Violet. In the fiords and morasses of Norway——"

"Come over here, won't you? and tell me all about Norway," commanded my mistress. "And, Caroline, give me another cup of hot water."

The kettle was no longer boiling. She knew that. I was a fast prisoner at my tea-table, on parole with the bell-rope, until her outrageous behest should have been performed. (Lady Violet was suffering from indigestion, she said. I thought, I even feared, although I hated her, that it was something much more serious.) Colonel Lisbon went over to the other side of the room. Perry left Lady Violet and came to me, and bade me good-bye.

"Jehane wants you to come to tea with us——"

"With *us*?" said I, very crustily, though, indeed,

that crust had no reference either to Perry or to his two lady-loves.

"Yes, on Sunday. That's your day out, isn't it? Bring the lantern-jaws, if you can get him."

"He is Lady Violet's friend, and he is extremely good-looking," said I; "and if I could get him to walk out with me, as you suggest, I certainly shouldn't waste him on going to tea with you and your two turtle doves."

"Won't you come alone, then?"

"I'll write," said I. "I believe I'm engaged to go to Margot Bligh. Good-bye, Perry. Divide your favours as equally as you can."

"Nay, I simply *can't* marry them all," said Perry deprecatingly. "I know about a hundred hard-working girls in flats, all equally nice, and, of course, I'm equally nice to all of them. Good-bye, old girl. Try to come. I'm going to send in a Buzzard cake, and some sweets. They fatten. Jehane wants plumping out a bit, then she'll be stunning."

I blew out the light of the spirit kettle, Lady Violet having received her hot water, wandered about the room a little, rearranged an ornament or two, and finally drifted out of the door in a weak, indeterminate way. I wondered if Colonel Lisbon, who had never even raised his head as I departed—from policy surely?—would write and propose to profit by my Sunday out? I had told him of it when we last parted. It was my only chance of seeing him alone. He could easily write

and make an appointment, and, of course, I should find a letter from him on my plate to-morrow. So it was particularly stupid of me, when I heard the door bang behind him twenty minutes later, to sit down on my box, covered with an anti-macassar, and cry at the clang of the big door reverberating through the house. It is an unpleasant, hateful noise at the best of times, and when it signifies the departure of what one loves best in the world, it assumes the accent of doom. Before I had done crying, Lady Violet called. Her voice sounded weak, cracked, uncertain. It seemed as if she had been somehow roughly shaken up, and some unsuspected lesions laid bare. I hurried downstairs. Her words were strangely at variance with the ideas suggested by her tired voice.

"Have I no other afternoon gown?" she asked me. "I don't care for this one on me at all."

"You have your new glacé silk."

'Remind me to put that on to-morrow. Don't forget! Though they do say taffeta ages——"

I stared at her cavernous cheeks, which seemed to me quite green in the hollows. Her wig was more antipathic to her complexion than ever. She had grown to my accustomed eyes considerably thinner—a bad sign at her age. She accentuated my suspicions by tugging hard at the obviously unsupported basque of her bodice.

"Welman dresses me too old and stout," she said. "I have grown thinner, on the contrary.

Come and read to me, Carrie, for goodness' sake, and don't stare so! You have one expression which is absolutely sheeplike. By the way, I have asked Colonel Lisbon to dine with us quietly on Saturday. Order things — have it nice. He amuses me."

There was no letter for me the next day. He evidently meant to speak to me on Saturday if he could get a chance, and make some arrangement for the morrow, and I had said that I would have no hole-and-cornering, no kissing behind doors, nothing that would be vulgar and unsuitable for a woman in my position! I had, moreover, promised that he might have me all to himself on Sundays sometimes, that he might take me to tea at some quiet place, perhaps even to dinner at a respectable restaurant, where it would not be compromising to be seen together. There we might have, perhaps, taken each other's hands over, not under, the table for a moment. It was all that could be permitted to lovers in our case, and it might have been attained by the outlay of a letter which cost nothing, and entailed no risks, for I am at least exempt from the necessity of submitting my correspondence to Lady Violet.

I was so hurt that I sat down to the corner of my dressing-table in my own room, pushed away all the brushes and things, and consummated a rash act. I wrote to Jehane, and accepted her invitation to tea next Sunday.

The rest of the week passed away sleepily,

calmly, wearily. Lady Violet consulted a specialist on Friday, but refused to give me any account of his examination. I suppose he told her that she was suffering from an excess of uric acid, the sort of thing they tell so many tiresome old women, and which annoys, without cautioning them. It must have been something of this kind, or she couldn't have kept it to herself. Only, she seemed to experience a strange difficulty in walking, and spoke pathetically once or twice of having recourse to her *bête noire*, a bath-chair.

"I have always vowed, Carrie, that I would not become a bath-chair woman," she said, "but I did not say I would die first, did I?"

This was a joke. I duly hee-hee'd; I was so sad myself, that I was able to feel sorry for her.

On Saturday, punctual to the hour, Colonel Lisbon came. I have said he was a very handsome man, and he looked his best in evening dress. We were four. Old Dr Jenkins had been convened to make us symmetrical, and to talk to me. It was not necessary, as a general thing, for me to be talked to, but Lady Violet was sensible enough to allow for a possible instinct of courtesy latent in her guests, and made their minds easy by providing a half-deaf, half-blind *vis-à-vis* for me. I was to be no tax on Colonel Lisbon, who was thus left free to devote himself solely to his hostess.

I bellowed mildly at Dr Jenkins all through dinner in a painstaking, consecutive fashion, so as to leave no loopholes for possible remarks

addressed to me by the younger man, and Lady Violet really enjoyed herself. Not so my ancient partner, who vastly preferred his patient to me. Dr Jenkins quite resented the fact, so sternly presented to him, that a handsome man in his prime, has it all his own way with an old woman, but he had his revenge.

The dinner was consumed — I had ordered it very carefully — the liqueurs, the wines, the cigarettes were all on the table. Conversation flagged. We had sat an hour and a half. Lady Violet was tired, the shades under her eyes were lilac. After picking a crystallised orange, she rose totteringly, with the conventional phrase, but without catching my eye . . . the two men stood up to let us pass. . . .

The candle nearest to Colonel Lisbon fell on to the cloth, and set alight the fluffy table-centre, which was Lady Violet's pride and delight. It came from Constantinople, and purported to be the cast-off veil of the principal Sultana. It blazed up at once, and Lady Violet, whose nerves were worth nothing after the strain of the long dinner, fainted.

Then there was a hulla-baloo. Dr Jenkins and Staples hauled Lady Violet into the back dining-room through the folding doors, while Colonel Lisbon and I put the fire out. We worked hard. Nobody minded us. Staples and Dr Jenkins were to be seen through the opening, clustered over Lady Violet's prostrate figure, and while they were

all thus deeply engaged, Colonel Lisbon walked softly up to the curtains and pulled them together.

He came back to me with a victorious smile, took me in his arms and kissed me.

I could hardly breathe, much less speak. Yet his embrace was gentle, courteous, perfect, as one might say. It wore, however, an air of premeditation that vexed me, and I was quite prepared, when he let me go, for his remark: "Clever trick, that, wasn't it?"

"Whose trick?"

"Mine, of course. Does Dr Dodderer look capable of it? Besides, he had no motive to wish to obtain a *tête-à-tête* with little Carrie Courtenay. Darling, how pretty you are!"

"You have spoilt Lady Violet's table-centre."

"I can get her another. It was worth that to hold you quivering in my arms. Dearest, you are most adorably shy, you know."

"I am not so much shy," I said sadly, "as shocked. I daresay I am stupid, but I have such a dislike to tricks and subterfuges of all kinds."

"And I delight in them. . . . It is all that is left to the primitive savage in us. I can't carry you off bodily, Carrie, so I commit a kind of arson to get two words with you. Now tell me, what are you going to do to-morrow?"

"I am going out to tea with some people."

"Not with some people. With me."

"I can't. I promised to go and see Jehane Bruce and Miss Lancaster."

"Fine women—but they must both give way to the superior savage. I have the best claim. I am your lover."

He looked across the table at me, over the ruins of the Sultana's veil, and I should perhaps not have been able to withstand the appeal of his eyes—but suddenly the curtain was pushed aside, and Dr Jenkins came through. It was lucky that I was on the opposite side of the dining-table to Colonel Lisbon, for Staples followed the doctor, and she is neither blind nor deaf.

"Lady Violet had recovered," said the old man. "She is now in the drawing-room, and hopes that Colonel Lisbon will accompany me upstairs after having taken wine. Will you take wine, sir?"

I escaped. I had no more talk with my lover that evening.

We had many, many more evenings like this, barring the fire. Colonel Lisbon dined again, lunched often, in fact scarce a day passed without his assisting at some meal or other. Lady Violet grew weaker. Jenkyns called oftener and talked earnestly to Colonel Lisbon. I was quite out of it.

One pleasant incident enlivened a dull, dreary winter. Little Michelle was married to her Herbert. Her sister was her one handsome, highly-complacent bridesmaid. For Michelle was good enough to take their joint mother along with her to Hans Place, an arrangement with which Mariuscha did not quarrel.

## CHAPTER XI

MARIUSCHA'S flat was furnished on quite a different plan from that which had dictated the arrangement of that of Jehane Bruce. Turkish and Syrian hangings were Jehane's fetish; to Mariuscha they were anathema. They made work. On the other hand, Mariuscha ran to little cups and trays—hers was a smoker's den.

She sat therein for long hours alone, and smoked. She was Eastern in her houri-like proclivities, her power of gorgeous inanition, her imperial *far niente.* I have sometimes sat with her for ages, watching her inhale and make smoke rings, languidly extended on a wicker reclining chair, her black skirts betraying the stiff white frills of her petticoat, negligently tossed across her ankles. Mariuscha always dressed in black, very soberly. I suppose she found her feminine outlet in beautifully got-up petticoats, and in carefully dressed hair.

Margot Bligh was painting her portrait. But she had not been able to induce the languid beauty to give her sittings at her studio; all she could obtain was permission to come and do what she

could at a portrait of "Mariuscha At Home." She profited by this somewhat ungracious permission—Margot was incapable of accepting a rebuff—and she was, besides, a hard worker. So by the end of April, the portrait of "Mariuscha Smoking" was far advanced. The painter was very keen on having the work exhibited to Mr Hardman, who, she fondly hoped, would purchase it. Though Miss Bligh sincerely disapproved of her model's connection with him, she regarded it in the light of good business, and would not scruple to profit by it if she could.

But Mariuscha sternly refused to "let the old boy know" that a portrait of herself was on the stocks.

"No, Margot, don't ask me. I have seen nothing of Mr Hardman for several years."

"Who has forbidden it?" asked Margot curiously.

"Society," answered Mariuscha shortly, puffing out some pretty smoke rings and threading them nonchalantly.

"People thought your friendship improper, I suppose. What censorious beasts people are!"

"You think so yourself," Mariuscha answered with her usual directness.

"Oh, I — I think we professional women — I consider you professional, because you do a bit of secretarial work now and then, don't you, dear?—professional women are absolved from convention. We simply can't afford to pay for chaperonage. That's about it. Who gave you your lovely

necklace? I have often wondered. Did Mr Hardman?"

"An old Miss Brown, of Paisley," replied Mariuscha, smoking on solemnly. "I have had it ages."

"Like you have that dress. It is wonderful how you keep your things!"

"I am neat."

"But with all that cigarette ash about——"

"I have plenty of trays," said Mariuscha, knocking off a heavy tip as she spoke, perfectly aware that Margot had duly resented her transparent equivocation about the necklace. Margot was deadly curious and a cat, but Mariuscha wanted to know what was being said about her. She knew, besides, that Casimir Livingston had commissioned the portrait now in hand, so that if Mr Hardman could indeed be induced to purchase "Mariuscha Smoking," he would only get a replica. Those were Margot's ways.

The hours wore on. Margot painted with assiduity. Mariuscha smoked negligently. The artist did all the talking.

"Is Mr Leadham tiresome to work for?" she asked presently.

"No. Why?"

"He seems to give you plenty of days off."

"I take them."

"How do you manage?"

"I say I have a headache. It's often true."

"How many a day do you smoke, Mariuscha?"

"About five-and-twenty, or more."

"Your under-lip is sprinkled with bits of tobacco now. I suppose smoking is meat and drink to you? I imagine your commissariat is no trouble —they always say smokers have no appetite."

"A crust and a bone." Mariuscha smiled.

"I wonder you keep your little white teeth. By the way, to change the subject, you have heard that Mr Hardman is failing?"

"Only from you. You are the only person I know who sees him."

"I saw an envelope addressed to you in his handwriting on the hall table as I came in."

"I suppose you will not believe me when I tell you there is no sort of communication to me inside it. But you may think what you like."

"Oh, I wish I could give that speech in the way you said it, in my picture. It's *you*—you are a regular Slav, Mariuscha."

"What's that?"

"Oh, a foreigner, or a fatalist of sorts—I don't know. Look here, I'm going to work."

Mariuscha smoked three more cigarettes, and the sitting was over. It was four o'clock. Margot had to go to an unimportant private view of pictures somewhere or other, where they gave you your tea. She was going for her tea. As she descended the stairs leading down from Mariuscha's flat, she met young Mr Livingston going up.

"You will find Mariuscha at her tenth cigarette. Do try to persuade her to drop smoking for a bit.

You can't think how disgusting it is to see a pretty girl with her lips all over tobacco."

With this she left him. He rang the bell of Mariuscha's door, and she opened it by pulling a string from where she sat. Her maid was out.

The first thing the young man observed was that Mariuscha's under-lip bore no trace of tobacco. She was fairer than even he had thought. Her pose of indifference was more obvious than usual. It was what had attracted him to her. She was a beautiful savage, who did not care whether he was attracted or not. He adored her. He disapproved of her. Certain serious charges that Margot Bligh had insinuated against her, had sunk deeply into his mind. He hated Margot Bligh, but he wanted these charges refuted.

"I am so glad you are in, Mariuscha," he said, calling her by her Christian name for the first time. He had been given leave to do so, but up to now he had never availed himself of the permission. "I wish I could persuade you to do something—to please me," he said, plunging into his business at once. "It is this: don't see that little cat. I met her on the stairs. Whenever I see her, she worries me by the things she says about you."

"I know she has got what they call a down on me," said Mariuscha, smiling kindly. "But then, you know, I never discourage any one. I let them be themselves. Every one to me seems

nearly alike, all mean, all petty, all seeking their own interests—as, indeed, I am myself. I don't pretend to be less selfish than the rest of the world."

"You seem to have been brought up in a pretty cynical school," he said, without thinking what he was saying, since what he was going to say was so much more important. "You have knocked up against hard people for so long, poor girl. That is the worst of earning one's own living. I always think nice women ought to have somebody to stand between them and the brutal world. A father, or a brother, if not a husband."

"I have a mother," said the girl shortly; "but somehow she is no more good to me than I am to her, and that's not much. You know, I'm not what is called a good daughter; Michelle is."

"Don't abuse yourself, please. You are all right to me. You know you are. You are more than all right, Mariuscha, you are everything!"

"A proposal—what?"

"Darling, you knew it was coming, didn't you? Say you did!"

"Oh yes."

"And, tell me, what did you mean to do about it?"

"Accept it," answered the girl; "but now, if Margot has been at you, telling you dreadful things about me, all I can say is, you had better go away and believe them, if you want to."

"I don't see why I should do the conventional thing, and perhaps wreck two lives — certainly mine. I settled that I would come here to-day and ask you certain questions. If you choose to answer them, well and good. If you refused, well and good still. It could make no real difference whether you gratified my — curiosity or not."

"Except to your peace of mind," said Mariuscha, "no real difference. Your 'real' touches me, and I don't think I would call it curiosity exactly. You want to know whether I am straight; isn't that it?"

He bowed his head. She rose, put down her cigarette, and came to him.

"I will let you kiss me," she said. "And I suppose I could not do that if—what Margot Bligh, my very good friend, tells you—were true. . . . Now, if you care to make any enquiries as to the details of the case, I'll answer them. Have a cigarette?"

"No, thank you. We won't talk about the matter any more."

"But I am curious to hear what my friend says about me. Or are you afraid of giving her away? It does not seem to me that we either of us owe her any particular loyalty."

"Indeed, we don't. Well, dear, she talks the absurdest rot, and spiteful, too! Ridiculous! She says, for one thing, that old Ralph Hardman pays the rent of this flat."

"She is right. The cheque for the quarter is lying in the hall now."

"But, dear——"

"Will you hand me that tray at your elbow? Remember, I have answered you faithfully and truly on the main point, and it seems to me that these minor details do not in the least affect the position. Still, if you care to know—I suppose you think in your world, that an honourable woman cannot let a man pay the rent of her house for her, without being expected to give an equivalent?"

He stammered something in the affirmative.

"But supposing the donor doesn't ask for an equivalent? There *are* a few men in the world generous enough to give all for nothing — you know Ralph Hardman? Does he not strike you as such a man?"

"I respect Ralph Hardman enormously."

"Well, then, and so do I. And I have surely had a better opportunity of forming an opinion on his character than even you. A finer, nobler nature never existed, you may take my word for it. He was sorry for me. He liked me. He liked me very much. He is out and out a gentleman. The one you have to condemn for want of all the finer feelings you admire is me!"

She touched her breast with her hand disparagingly.

"Come and sit beside me—not too close, please.

I don't want you to take my hand till I have told you all about it. Perhaps you won't care to then. Well, even then I can't help it. I am as I was made. Listen! Eight years ago, when we lost all our money, I got a little job to do some copying in the British Museum. It was for a funny, fussy old gentleman—Mr Hardman, in point of fact. He took a fancy to me, and asked me to call on his wife—all fair and square. They had no children. He took to me; she didn't mind me, I can truly say that. I was living with mother and Michelle then, and worrying their lives out. I ought to live alone; I am not domestic. He saw that. He took a flat for me. Mother and Mich' thought I earned the rent. But Mrs Hardman knew all about it, mind you. Then they asked me to stay with them down at their place in the country. I went there often after that. I made up my mind the moment I crossed the threshold of Hardman Hall. I saw the whole situation at a glance — this old, ugly, weak man, and a crowd of wretched, undeserving people begging and manœuvring, with no more right to inherit from a *nouveau riche*, as Mr Hardman was, than I had. . . . I had an eye for a manuscript, and I helped him to decipher some things there that were quite cryptic. Of course he adored me—as a secretary mostly—hardly at all as a woman."

She paused, and went on:

"I had to work pretty hard for this position. I had to be indefatigable, to be subservient, devoted

to his library and to him. All men are alike. I had to let him kiss me—once or twice—I suppose to gratify a sense of conventional rakishness from which even inveterate bachelors are not free. But——" Here she went pale for the first time; it was her way of blushing. "I should like you to understand that I don't mean that his kisses were like yours. If they had been, you understand, I could never have even suggested your kissing me —— Do I give you pain?"

"Rather. At least, you are honest."

"Oh yes; I am honest. But I am constitutionally lazy, and I like comfort, and I was afraid of being poor, of having to work and spoil my hands and my face. You needn't talk—some men are like that, too. They cannot bear the thought of having to work hard. It would have killed me. I could never have done it, I know. If this Hardman thing had not turned up I should have gone to the——"

"Don't say it," said he, stopping her mouth with his hand.

"You think me horribly immoral, I see. In fact, you consider the Hardman business a wrong move?"

"Of course I do. Any man would. Women, somehow, don't. But I think all the wrong of it is somehow counterbalanced by your frankness. I like it. I feel I know where I am with you. It must have been fairly painful for you to tell me all this, and of your own free will, too. You have

blinked nothing, not even the kisses. You have rather a queer sense of morality, I must say."

"And you cannot cure it. I am Mr Hardman's heiress, and mean to remain so. What is to be done with me?"

She crossed her hands on her lap, and looked extremely haughty. But she was not in the least prepared for Livingston's view of her admission, so carelessly made. He raised the pitch of his voice.

"He has left you his money?"

"Yes, and the place. It's a lovely old place, isn't it?"

"Good God! That's the other thing that Margot told me!"

"But——"

"One thing is certain. My wife cannot be Mr Hardman's heiress."

"Cannot she? And I was just thinking we would drain the moat and make it healthy."

"You must write to him at once and tell him of our engagement, and decline the legacy."

"I must?"

"Of course you must—that is, if you mean to have anything more to do with me."

"I don't know that I do. Our point of view is too different."

"Mine is the only decent point of view."

"Very likely. But I am *not* decent, you see."

He strode up and down, weakly and ineffectively, twisting his fair moustache. She sat quite

still, till he stopped short in front of her and delivered what he thought a poser.

"Look here, you accepted me just now—you admitted that you cared for me?"

"So I did—so I do. It is you who have gone back on me."

"How, by Jove?"

"You tell me now that you love Honour more, in the words of the sentimental song."

He stared. "Well, of course a man, conventionally speaking, at all events, loves honour more than anything. What else?"

"Do not let us conventionally speak, eh? Let us speak plainly. I will tell you that though I care for you, I care for the chance of this splendid succession quite as much, and I am not prepared to sacrifice my ambition to my love any more than you are willing to let your honour give way to yours. We talk of Love, with a big L. I say, what is it worth? An overrated factor in human affairs, a mere fugitive passing emotion! Set it against position, which I value, and honour, which is *your* pose—either of these endure much longer. I know myself—and I think I know you. We should both of us be miserable in the end, if we indulged our love at the expense of what we know in our heart of hearts to be of far greater importance to us!"

"You talk of position! Good God! Do you realise for one moment that if you allow this kind, doited old man to leave all he has to you,

a beautiful, lonely woman, who is no relation to him whatever, to the exclusion of all those that have a better title, you will be undone—disgraced for ever—your position worse than *nil*, not a soul would speak to you! All Miss Bligh has hinted would at once be assumed to be true. A precious legacy, indeed! The world won't allow that sort of juggling with inheritances."

"The world always forgives money. We shall see. I am going to take the risk. And if I am deserted, I shall find some pleasant pauper to marry me, I have no doubt. That's if I should want to marry, which I don't. I am not what is called a marrying woman. But I love you —I love you. . . . !" She reached herself a cigarette.

"Don't repeat that—that fallacy! You madden me by repeating it. Yet once more—Mariuscha, darling, won't you write to Mr Hardman and say plainly that you will have nothing to do with his money or his property, and trust yourself and your future to me? It isn't as if I were a pauper—I make a fairly decent income, quite enough to keep you on."

"But I am rather extravagant, dear Casimir; my washing bill, not to speak of my tobacconist's, is large. And I want to be *very* extravagant—very, very! I love you and will marry you, but I will keep Mr Hardman's money."

Livingston argued with her for a good half-hour more, till I came in. He then took up his hat and

went out hastily, making a good deal of noise in the hall, and finally banging the door as he left. Mariuscha, meanwhile, welcomed me; she was rather pale.

"I am glad you came in," she said. "You saved the situation. But isn't it an odd thing that an ordinary man can't take a facer of any sort without throwing down all the things in the umbrella-stand and not being able to find his stick?"

It was then she told me all about the facer, and enabled me to reconstruct the scene. The reason people tell me their affairs is, I have long since discovered, because I never interrupt and never ask to have obscure points elucidated. No one ever tells one all, or means to do so. What I said when Mariuscha had finished her laconic account of her own tragedy—she considered it a slight "tiff"; I saw it as a turning-point—my only remark was that I did not believe she ever would marry. This phrase has sometimes the merit, from a match-making point of view, of instigating a wild desire in the listener to falsify the prediction. Mariuscha, however, took it calmly.

"Very well! I fancy, if the truth were known, a great many women only care to marry at all for the sake of having a child of their own—a girl to dress, the frivolous ones, or why do you always hear them longing for it to be a girl? And after it is properly born and they feel better, they don't, some of them, care if the father of it

is at the bottom of the sea. And then the deserted husband gets jealous! Look at my sister Michelle! The straight nose of Herbert Langshire is quite out of joint, simply as a result of his own baby's advent."

"It's an awfully nice child."

"Yes, it is, and I am fond of it. I think I'll adopt it, and relieve Herbert and restore him his wife. I like other women's children best; I am too lazy to have my own babies!"

## CHAPTER XII

MARGOT BLIGH opened the door to me herself with many a mysterious recommendation to silence. It was a week after my visit to Mariuscha.

"How smart you are!" I whispered. "Is somebody dead?"

"No, mother's in bed. I took her clothes away, otherwise she is quite well. I told her she had a chill, when I heard that Mr Hardman was coming, for I wasn't going to have a repetition of the Langshire fiasco."

"Is he here now, then?"

"Yes, in the studio, 'swithering' about 'Crabbed Age and Youth.' Do you know, it is practically the first time he has been up to town since his wife's death, and Mariuscha, I'm certain, is at the bottom of it! She has sent for him, and passed him on here, as soon as she had done with him. Mariuscha never neglects a pal."

"What did *she* want him for?" I mused aloud, thinking over the interview I had interrupted yesterday. Mariuscha had been in a white heat

of temper then and had acted on her impulse, whatever it was. Perhaps a good impulse, an honourable one, who knows? She was a creature of surprises. Margot went on about her own affairs:

"Don't you think it is a good plan, Carrie, to leave the buyer alone with the work of art, like a bridegroom left *tête-à-tête* with the bride that is to be? Soon he begins to feel compromised and as if he was bound to buy it, having raised its hopes."

"If you leave him too long he will begin to see her faults."

"See she is out of drawing and so on? Well, I do rather mistrust the foreshortening of that left shoulder; I have had an unco' lot of trouble with it. Perhaps we had better go in? He will like to see you, Carrie. He once said you were like Flora MacIvor in *Waverley*."

"Who would have thought the old man had so much blood in him?" said I, as we entered the studio, in as casual and *dégagée* a style as possible. Dear old Ralph Hardman turned round, saluted me with old-fashioned courtesy, and asked for a pen and ink. Margot, her eyes nearly starting out of her head, produced a pen and the silver family inkstand, an heirloom, and Mr Hardman, fetching a cheque-book out of his pocket, wrote out a cheque for a hundred and fifty guineas.

Then Margot, having attained her immediate

end, kindly sought to divert the stream of benefaction in my direction.

"You remember Miss Courtenay, who came to Hardman Hall once with Lady Violet Barnes?"

"I remember perfectly," said he. "Violet's *souffre-douleur*. Well, when will you come to Hardman again?"

"When next Lady Violet comes, I suppose—and hope," I added, for I was touched by his cordiality.

"You need not wait for my cousin," said he, and added mysteriously: "Violet's time is now fully occupied with another 'ploy.'" What did he mean? He was not so buried in parchments as one had supposed. I stood pondering, devising my explanation of my "living in" with Lady Violet, and then, I suppose, some sort of telepathy with Margot, who was mopping and mowing beside us, prompted him to say: "Come with Miss Bligh. She is coming to me in August with her mother. She has her picture of my place to finish. There is a lot to show you. We have been knocking out the fireplaces, and laid bare some splendid chimney corners big enough to hold half a dozen people on either side. The Early Victorian idiots had filled them up and made cupboards for storing firewood. We nearly had a fire there last November. When will you come?"

His strange, thin, weedy, boyish voice always

gave me a peculiar sensation, as if the owner of the voice was a long way off and very friendless. It was a voice out of focus, as it were, the voice one would be apt to attribute to a ghost. It always made me feel uncomfortable, and yet I liked him.

"Lady Violet is sure to bring me in August," I said slowly, but he interrupted me.

"Nonsense! *you* come alone, come alone. I like girls."

Margot nudged me. "Say you will, Carrie. He hardly knows what he is saying. . . ."

So I did say I would be delighted to go, some time, and Margot found the hat and stick of her benefactor and opened the door. Now he had paid, she didn't care how soon she saw the last of him. I very nearly volunteered to walk with him to a cab, as he would not have one sent for, but Margot again nudged me—"He may be going to see Mariuscha, how do we know? and not want to take you and me into his confidence!" So I desisted, and allowed her to drag me back into her studio.

"Did you ever know such an old cure?" she exclaimed. "And now I come to look at it with an unprejudiced eye—the 'pic.' is sold, so it doesn't matter what I think—I do see that shoulder is fearfully out."

"Can't you set to work and get it right?"

"Couldn't before, so can't now, without the spur of making it saleable," said she sensibly. "What

is sold is sold, and can't be amended; don't you think so?"

"It can't be countermanded," said I, "at any rate."

"Well, Carrie, and you have done a good stroke of work, too." She mimicked him. "He likes girls! I should just think he did! He, he!"

"I shall never be his guest in that way, Margot," said I seriously, "unless Lady Violet takes me there; and I think it is horrid of you to sneer, because I feel sure he is not that sort of man at all, and I do so hate that common way of looking at things. You don't seem able to understand pure, abstract, kind-heartedness——"

"Platonics, eh?"

"Oh, if you talk about platonics, I'm done."

"Platonics and Mariuscha!" mused the terrible Margot. "They don't seem to go together. And Mariuscha had to pay her footing, you may be quite certain, even if it was ever such a little one. I say, Carrie, would you let an old man like that kiss you for the sake of——"

"If he was old enough, I would," I said cynically.

"He *is* quite old enough," mused Margot. "I often thought of it when I was down there, and wondered if I possibly could if he offered to. He is certainly not repulsive, but—still! I do think it was very clever of me to sell him a 'pic.' without anything of that kind being mentioned."

"Men don't generally mention it when they are going to kiss a girl. They just do it."

"Don't you talk as if you had such acres of experience, Carrie. You are far too prim for anything of that kind ever to come your way. You are getting much prettier, though. I wonder why? I should like to make a sketch of you, I really should. For nothing, of course."

"Companions don't have time to sit for their likenesses, bless you."

"No; and I suppose there is no chance of your ever being anything else."

"Not the slightest," I said, as she opened the door to let me out, and I suddenly found myself face to face with Colonel Lisbon, who had just rung the bell for admittance.

"All the Hardman Hall party will soon meet on my humble doorstep," said Margot, adding, tactless as usual: "Come, Carrie, change your mind and come in again."

Imagine my doing such a thing! I primmed my mouth and murmured: "I should like to, but you know I have an appointment. Give my love to your mother, Margot, and I hope next time I come, she will be well enough to see me. Good-bye."

That was the way it had to be. Of course Margot had not the slightest idea of how I was tearing myself up by the roots. I was very cross, but, after all, it was my own fault. I had refused to go out with him last night, and there was no reason why he should not call upon Miss Bligh. He often did so, it appeared. He asked me

politely how Lady Violet was to-day, and I replied ingenuously, while Margot stood by, laughing derisively at the account of Lady Violet's symptoms. She had scant reverence for my old woman of the sea, as she called her. As I walked along to the 'bus, I envied Margot her freedom to abuse potential bread and butter, and her very slight talent, which, however, was sufficient to procure her that freedom. For, beyond contributing to the expenses of the house, she was known to do nothing for her old woman of the sea, a much more pleasant old woman than mine.

My depression got into my legs as I ploughed wearily up Jehane's staircase, and knocked at her door, which badly needed repainting. It was opened to me by a cheerful, debonair, and smiling Desdemona. I had never seen any one so changed, and I said so, knowing well that personal discussion was what pleased her most.

"Yes, I am grown hard—hard!" she said complacently, tapping the bright bow she wore on her breast. "It's the only way."

She led me into the sitting-room where tea was spread, a bountiful, tidy, organised tea, neatly cut bread and butter, a Buzzard cake—the half-crown size—reposing on the famous Spode dish on a really clean table-cloth, and in the neighbourhood of spoons that very nearly shone. There was a kettle singing, positively singing, for joy of earth and cleanliness, on the hob, and two solid, well-stuffed cane chairs drawn up by the fire.

"The love-birds are not in yet," said she. "You are a little before your time."

"You and Jehane seem to have changed parts," said I, sitting down fearlessly in one of these obviously quite reliable chairs.

"I daresay. All I know is, we get proper teas, and are thoroughly cleaned and tidied up, just because the great Jehane has left off utterly despising and hating men, *as I do now*. I say, I've begun a novel. I am getting on beautifully with it. Soon, I shan't need to care for any Perry that ever was born; in fact, Perry has been rather useful to me in my career than not. Meantime, Jehane has got my leavings, and welcome, and we two live on the fat of the land—all because of a man!"

"You do seem to hate and despise them."

"Yes, don't I!" said she, beaming with pride. "I flatter myself I have let your brother see it!"

"Oh yes, Perry will see anything you want him to. And have he and Jehane really and truly fixed it up? It will be his ninth—or is it his tenth?"

"I don't know if it will be his ninety-ninth, nor do I care," she replied in accents of such truth and temper that I exclaimed:

"I believe you are really cured of Perry."

"Yes, completely. And Jehane has got him badly! Much good may he do her. He has done me a better turn than he knows. Here they come, Carrie; if I get engaged ninety-nine times, and

live to be a hundred, I am never, never going to make such a fool of myself as you will see them doing. I am aching for my tea, aren't you? See this gorgeous cake Perry gave Jehane!" she continued, picking a comfit off the top of it with manicured fingers and contemptuous air.

Jehane rustled in. I had never heard her rustle before. She had got a new frock on. Perry had a new tie. He didn't look shy at all, but sat down like a caliph, and made himself very pleasant. He really is charming, though I began to suspect that Desdemona was not nearly so cured as I had thought. She behaved herself, however, and the whole thing went on wheels. Between us, we nearly finished the Buzzard cake and the packet of preserved cherries which Perry had brought for Desdemona. For Jehane he produced a box of cigarettes. It was quite Eastern.

When I rose to go, Perry perfunctorily volunteered to accompany me. I did not want him in the least, and promised myself that I would receive his brotherly confidences, if he had any to make, on the way down, and return him to his fair ones.

In pursuance of this plan—"Now then, Perry, you run back," I said, as we reached the foot of the stairs, getting a good hold of my skirt, and preparing to issue into the street.

"No, no, dear old girl; I am determined to see you home. I am going to—unless you have got some other fellow waiting for you round the corner?"

"Don't be a goose, dear. Who is likely to wait for me round the corner, or anywhere else? You know I am used to being alone. I don't want you to neglect Jehane—or Desdemona, I don't know which of them has the most claim on you for the present moment—for me. But a word in your ear: you can't marry both of them, you know."

"I don't want to marry either," said Perry, "so far as I see. Look here, Carrie, I intend to come with you. It isn't decent for you to be going about alone."

As he spoke he glanced beyond me up the street, and put his head in again suddenly.

"On second thoughts, Carrie, darling, I suppose I had better not make either Desdy or Jehane mad. I have got them so nice and pacified. I like the two of them together, it shows off the pattern of the workaday woman finely. So, since you are so pressing in your refusal, I will take you at your word, and let you trot home all alone."

"I'm all right, you know."

"Oh yes; you will be quite all right," said he with conviction, and a funny little smile.

"Of course I shall be all right. Haven't I done it hundreds of times before?"

"Oh, I say, Carrie, you shouldn't admit that. Fie, fie! Well, adieu, and God bless you, and all your machinations."

He turned and ran back upstairs like lightning, while I went blithely out into the street to find

Colonel Lisbon waiting for me. I was very cross, because he had made me ridiculous in my brother's eyes, and given him a weapon of perennial chaff against me. And the first question I asked him was how he had tracked me.

"Tracked is a word disagreeably suggestive of a police officer," said my lover, "or a mole-catcher, though there! Well, I asked the address of this little brown mole of her friend Margot Bligh, and I got it without much ado. You had told her you were off to Hardicanute Mansions. Did you go to see this famous Mariuscha?"

"No, I didn't. And why is Mariuscha famous?"

"Margot Bligh says she fancies that old Ralph Hardman has left her his place and all the money."

"Margot Bligh had better hold her tongue, and not go spreading silly gossip about other people. Mary Lancaster, though I don't like her, is quite straight."

"But it isn't particularly crooked to contrive to fascinate a rich old gentleman who doesn't know what on earth to do with his money, and divert it into her own channel away from a set of greedy fortune-hunters, who have no more right to it than she has. He is only a self-made man after all, and has no children——"

"Kindred first," said I. "He has a sort of relation——"

"You mean that wretched anæmic-looking clergyman and his daughter, and the water-

brained lad I thrashed? Oh, their chance is as ghostly as themselves. I must say, I thought he liked young Livingston when I was down there."

"Only because young Livingston was the only one who did not care twopence about his wretched money."

"Quite the most ingratiating pose of all!" answered Colonel Lisbon, sneering. "I wish I had tried it myself."

"You!"

"My dear, you are yourself implying that I am like the others. I took you as you meant. You lumped us altogether in your condemnation. Well, I won't attempt to throw dust in your shrewd eyes. I tell you, I should be exceedingly glad if old Ralph had seen fit to cast the handkerchief in my direction. I want money. I must have money before I can marry you. The love of money is coupled in my mind with the more honourable emotion of love for you. They are interdependent. Come, child, realise it. Look facts in the face. Be business-like. Please not to consider me a vulgar adventurer because I know what I want, and do my best to get it."

"You had better go and make yourself agreeable to Mariuscha, then," said I, "if you really think she is Mr Hardman's heir."

"I hear that young Livingston is doing that. It is Margot Bligh who tells me all these little facts."

"Is that why you go and see Margot so much? To glean information about a poor, rich old man, whom, between you all, you will not allow to end his days in peace."

"Now, now, Carrie, who spoke of murdering him? They can all do what they like, but I never even see him now. He has dropped me, and I him."

"When you find it is no go."

"Exactly, you vulgar little thing. Oh, I wish it would get dark! Confound these long light spring evenings. If it was only dark, I might kiss you in a doorway."

"I am very glad you cannot," I said, gently, for I could not be forcible about an untruth.

"Tell me, Carrie, are you just a little jealous of Miss Bligh and Lady Violet?"

"Of Lady Violet? Why should I be jealous of her?"

"Well, you see, she is very usually civil to me. I find it somewhat oppressive, between ourselves. She has written to-day to ask me to lunch, and then take her to a *matinée*. Bore, but it gives me a chance of seeing you."

"I should not have the money for a seat spent on me. I shan't be there. When does she ask you to take her?"

"Next Saturday, naturally—day for *matinées*. Then she speaks of getting me an invitation to stay with her sister-in-law, Mrs What's-her-name —this August."

"Oh yes, at Frome. We often go there for a fortnight in August."

"That's all right, then. We shall meet. I shall accept. Are you glad?"

"Very."

It was a lie again. I was strangely, unaccountably not glad. I did not feel as if I should get any happiness out of the fact of our being fellow-guests—in my present position, at any rate, that is to say.

"It's an awful world," I said.

James pressed the hand that was on his arm. We were in Kensington Gardens.

"What an arrant pessimist you are!" said he. "Now I am an optimist. I am not very good, so do you by any chance believe that I shall be damned eternally? Is not that your austere Calvinistic creed? You cannot possibly call me one of the elect?"

"I don't like allusions to Scripture," said I, "and you know I am not a Calvinist. Oh, James, I wonder if you love me?"

"Carrie, you *are* funny! You have actually stopped standing still to think about it, in the very middle of the Broad Walk. You are a very strange woman, and I do love you—I do with all my heart and soul. I love nobody but you, and I shall never change. But, Carrie, I am not a sentimentalist, and if you will persist in trying to assess me by romantic standards, I warn you that you will find me wanting."

"I wish you would not be so mysterious," I said; "it worries me. Well, let us walk on. We have exhausted that subject."

"I won't consent to drop it until you tell me that you believe me when I say that I love you."

"When you look at me like that, I do."

"How difficult it is to get things out of you! However, I will try to keep on looking like that—whatever it is," he said, in a low voice that sounded sincere. There was no more to be said. We walked on. I was aware that he looked at me now and then curiously. I was shy of him. I think he did really love me then, while meditating and shaping possibly courses of which I should disapprove. I write this in view of what happened afterwards. He left me at Lady Violet's door, or rather near it, at half-past seven.

Lady Violet was taciturn all through supper. She hardly said a word to me, but upstairs in the drawing-room, as I was getting out the bézique box, and asked if I had anywhere to go for a holiday engagement.

I was so terribly surprised that I absently put the box back again on the shelf, while she stared at me, and, I fancy, rather enjoyed my distraction. She continued, turning her head a little away from me:

"Because I am invited to go a yachting expedition on Lord Lyminge's yacht, and he does not suggest my bringing any one with me."

"Not a maid?" said I; "and I thought you hated the sea."

"Staples will do, I think. She will enjoy the fresh breezes, and so shall I. Yes, I shall take Staples, who has been very faithful. It will be for August and September. Now, Carrie, what can *you* do?"

"I shall accept an invitation that I have just received."

"To whom, may I ask?"

"To Mr Ralph Hardman's."

"*Ralph* has asked you?"

"Yes, Lady Violet, for an indefinite visit. Have you any objection to my going?"

"Not the slightest," said she, with her mouth awry. "But you needn't Lady Violet me when there is no one else in the room."

She did not withdraw her permission to me to leave her as I had expected, and hoped. She nervously worked her throat and swallowed—a certain amount of dudgeon, so I thought, but she only said quietly:

"You will join Ralph's harem of girls. I am told he sees nothing else nowadays. Scarcely respectable, but you are old enough to look after yourself. Well, you shall go; I daresay you will find some way—some decent way—of making yourself useful to him. I will continue to pay you your salary, and washing, and your fares, and anything extra you may have to disburse. Now get the cards."

I thanked her. She was a lady after all, and was treating me very decently. Only—why was she prepared to spend any money to get rid of me? Why did she prefer the ministrations of Staples to mine? Staples was singularly plain.

## CHAPTER XIII

THERE were only two guests staying at Hardman Hall, Margot Bligh and Margot Bligh's mother, who lived mostly in her own room and enjoyed every comfort and luxury. Dear old thing! but she never knew who was speaking to her, or what you said. Ralph Hardman had not exchanged two words with her in his life, but he would have taken in a wilderness of old women if he could have found rooms for them all. Mrs Mason had gone: Margot had edged her out a long time ago, and the butler, Martin. Only women need apply now. Four trim and efficient parlour-maids flaunted their fresh white cap-ribbons and starched print skirts in all the corridors. Mr Hardman's new fad! Even the gardeners slept out of the house. The hands of these houris were most carefully attended, and they had all of them a graceful, pleasing address, and were assiduous over changing plates.

They were all equal; nobody had a right to dictate to them, and the wonder was the work got done at all, and so decently, considering. To be a bachelor's parlour-maid is, however, a great

draw, and I soon found out the reason why they nursed his regard so tenderly. They were all pretty, and knew it. The cook was fat, and an excellent cook, and so long as her own kitchen-maid obeyed her, did not supervise them in the least. We jogged along very comfortably, and Margot's portrait of Hardman Hall, like the web of Penelope, made very small progress. It represented the title-deeds of her stay here, and, moreover, she had got interested in something else. She wanted to paint a scene from French history, between Madame du Deffand and Mademoiselle de Lespinasse. Mrs Bligh posed for the blind old patroness, but Margot was at her wits' end to find a model for her wayward companion. I was willing, but there was nothing like Mademoiselle de Lespinasse about me, except my condition; I said that I had always imagined the lady in question to be rather like Desdemona Cresswell.

"Now you say so, Carrie, there *is* a likeness. She has a blanched, fundamentally poor-spirited appearance. She must always have looked old-*passée* from her cradle. Those light, string-coloured women don't wear a bit! And lately she has taken to making bitter speeches. Has your brother been jilting her?"

"I don't know why you should think so."

"Whenever a woman takes to saying disagreeable things about matters that are perfectly indifferent to her, it is safe to conclude that she is thinking of Him!"

It was so: Desdemona and my brother had "had a final row," as Perry put it, had "fundamentally differed," to quote Desdemona, but I preferred to stand up for my brother; I said:

"Call it jilting, if you like. All Desdemona's men do jilt, or she says they do. She attracts bad behaviour as woollen attracts moth, or a looking-glass attracts women!"

"Just like poor Lespinasse. We'll have old Desdemona down and temper the wind to the jilted lamb, and get me a good model as well."

"But dare you ask visitors to Mr Hardman's house?"

"Dare—yes. I dare do anything that becomes a real artist, and the selection of models is half the battle. I'll settle Papa Hardman—square him. I have been here, off and on, now for about a year, and got my hand on all the levers."

She did square Mr Hardman; and Desdemona came down, more flaxen, more washed-out than ever, but graceful, and interesting as became a lady whom one of the minor papers, describing her appearance at a bazaar, had been known to characterise as "the fair, frail Miss Cresswell."

As soon as we were alone—"How do, Carrie?" said my brother's Ariadne, languidly. "I suppose I ought to feel hardly able to be civil to you?"

"Because I happen to be Perry's sister?"

"Oh, don't speak of Perry. When is he going to marry Miss Bruce?"

"Never, I should think."

A pale gleam of enjoyable contempt lighted poor Desdemona's worn face. She murmured: "Poor girl! She isn't really a bad sort. We both got into bad hands, old Jehane and I. Nay, I don't hate her. He had the decency not to give her as a reason for jilting me."

"Do you mean you were so old-fashioned as to ask him for his reasons? Oh, you will never make a novelist, if you disdain the rudiments like that."

"Don't be too sure!" Desdemona looked arch, and went on reflectively: "It was a very queer, perverse sort of scene. I don't know if you know what I mean, but he was the woman and I the man, all through—a strange reversal of parts, isn't it? He said in a cowed, apologetic way, 'I suppose you think me perfectly detestable?' And I said, *con amore*, 'I loathe you, Perry!' and then he laughed—laughed! A man's way, belittling one's poor tragedy!"

"Just now you said he was the woman!"

"Don't take me up so, Carrie. I can't bear it, while my nerves are unstrung as they are now. If you will have it, he behaved like neither man nor woman, but like Perry Courtenay. Imagine a man's telling a woman to her face he had found he didn't love her enough to marry her—for at last I did worm a reason out of him. He might surely have invented an excuse which would have saved my woman's pride."

"What is a better excuse? Another woman?"

"Yes, but that would be too commonplace for

dear Perry. He wants to do everything differently to every one else. I see through him now. I always did. The glamour has gone off the gingerbread——"

"Gilt, dear."

"I always felt," proceeded Desdemona, "rather than knew, that man through and through. He isn't so odd or original as he makes himself out. Not half so like Gringoire and Verlaine. I could expose him—and I have."

These, and kindred dark sayings were clear as noonday to both Margot and myself, but we enjoyed teasing her by markedly refraining from the questions so obviously angled for. She sent up to town for reams of paper, and was most particular about the writing-table in her room. After about a fortnight or so of mincing secrecy we decided to give her a chance of unburdening her mind. The question of my relationship was conveniently stowed. I did not defend my brother. Perry, being a ladies' man, must run his chance, and if he jilts a cat, must expect it to scratch him feebly. Feebly was the word. Desdemona, in spite of all her sex virulence and artistic immorality, could not possibly write what she loved to speak of as a "strong book." Her production must necessarily be a Chinese tea and straw-coloured satire, like her hair. To our mildly eager questionings she replied:

"Well, you know, girls, though I am reputedly a journalist, I have always wanted and intended

to write a work *de longue haleine*, but, so far, I have never had time. Now, thanks to Mr Perronet Courtenay, of whose influence on my career you both are aware, I have all the rest of my life to do it in. Art rushes in, where love goes out. We rise, on stepping-stones of our dead loves—to a higher class of work. I finished it here, one morning, in this delicious old-world garden, while the birds were singing and the drowsy mower's scythe——"

"Stop!" said I. "I shall look forward to reading all that in the novel. What I want to know is this, what have you put my poor brother in as?"

"Ah, Perry fell quite naturally into the part of villain. I believe I have succeeded in making him extremely telling. When one writes with one's heart on one's sleeve, you know——"

"Or in the inkpot?"

"He loves and he rides away several times—quite in character," continued the deserted novelist. "He comes, of course, to a bad end—breaks his neck, I think; but really, I forget how I engineered that. If your brother, Carrie, should ever happen to read it——"

"As you hope and intend that he shall!"

"He will certainly come back from his riding, and—talk of breaking necks—he will be apt to want to wring mine!"

"Good, dear Desdemona! Put that epigram into the novel."

"I don't see how I *can* get it in," said Desdemona, who had only a feeble and new-born sense of humour, inculcated during the course of her engagement to Perry, who had taken her in hand and done wonders in the short time he had allowed himself. "Carrie, darling, will you take it to a publisher's for me? So finely ironical a touch, that his sister should bear it to the altar of publication! Will you? It is tied up all ready, now, in brown paper."

"With a pink ribbon, I daresay?"

"No. Blue."

"That is quite naïve and wrong, dear. Take my advice—throw it in the fire!"

"I couldn't," she shrieked, flinging up her hands. "I should as soon think of strangling a new-born babe! I have laid it aside for a time—locked it in a cupboard in my room. And now I feel as if that cupboard contained a Frankenstein monster that might come out any minute and strangle me. It is very strong, Carrie, this child of my brain. It seems to batter at the door sometimes, and cry, 'Let me out! let me out! I am a work of art!' I have so much imagination. It seems to me that it grows in that cupboard. It waxes fat, and kicks, while I—look what a shadow I grow! My friend, let me lean on you. We must be going in; it is getting cold, and the first bell has gone for dinner."

## CHAPTER XIV

We dressed, we tried to make a good show of grateful, lively—and so far as Desdemona and I were concerned — deprecating womanhood, when at the stroke of the second gong we all converged on the little oak-panelled lobby near the drawing-room. In the misty, mediæval effect of half a dozen wax candles or so, our scanty breadths of cheap cotton waste and art muslin could be relied on to give the shimmering effect which was enough to please the old gentleman's inexpert eyes. Desdemona in her faded prettiness always looked a little marquise-like and French-miniaturish. Margot always got herself up like a Botticelli boy-angel, while my own highest level, that of a Scotch lassie—the old gentleman often called me Flora MacIvor, after the pale Jacobite of *Waverley*—was best attained by the wearing of dead white, or so I fancied. He always smiled and rose, with exquisite courtesy, when, having mustered in the lobby aforesaid, we elected a forewoman, and entered the drawing-room, to find him, his good, ugly, round Cromwellian face set in rigid black in our honour, rising from his armchair and flinging

away the *Times* with a noble gesture. He took us in to dinner each in turn ; we presented ourselves in the proper order every night, though Margot always assumed the head of the table.

"I undertake it," said she, "because I am the practical one, and know how to manage him best. Not with any view to 'coming' it over either of you or getting a mean advantage; I know well enough that that is no good, neither I nor any of us need ever hope to cut out Mariuscha. I call her the Lady of Shalott. This *is* Shalott. Moaty, mystic place! — damp, too! Do you know, the other day, when the old magician was just dozing off, he muttered her name?"

"Poor old dear!" said soft-hearted Desdemona. "He is dying to see her, perhaps. It seems rather hard on him and cruel, when *we* are all here, and nobody says anything."

"Ah, but that's just the way the world is. Nobody troubles to make a scandal or forbid him the girls he *doesn't* want. Besides, Mariuscha wouldn't come. She had her plan of campaign. And it's pretty dull here, you know, unless you're busy. I hate a house without a man-servant, and all the dusting those girls do is with their cap-ribbons and streamers. Still, I, personally, would stand a lot of solid boredom to get champagne every night, and such dry champagne, too! He doesn't seem to mind wasting it on girls without palates. Men, at least, say we haven't any. I sometimes laugh to myself, Carrie, when I think

how we girls have ousted the men — the men who would give their eyes to come down here and do themselves well. It would just suit them, lazy brutes! and we do very well without them, though I don't see why we shouldn't be able to have down some of our own 'boys,' just to amuse us. Who would you have, Carrie? I could do with the beautiful buccaneer."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Lisbon, of course; doesn't he always strike you as an adventurer, a cattle-lifter, a pirate of sorts, with his hungry eye and lithe frame? I don't believe he could keep his hands off some of the precious things lying about here——"

"Margot!"

"*You* needn't defend him, Carrie, anyway. What is he to you, because you happen to live in the house with him?"

"I don't. He dines occasionally."

"He's the tame cat, isn't he? Buccaneering a bit, I expect. By the way, I caught a glimpse of his handwriting on the hall table the other day— Mr Hardman came slippering along before I could see who it was addressed to. Himself, of course. Perhaps it has come into his head to ask the man down here? I wish I could suggest it. Shall I?"

"I daresay you have got the cheek."

"I have got the cheek to ask for anything that I am in the least likely to get by asking. I never waste my eloquence. I'll think about it. Or why could not you? Your voice won't tremble. An

uninterested person always is the most successful petitioner, I have noticed."

"Oh, do your own dirty work," I answered crossly. "How do you know *I* don't want him to come, too?"

The letters, only two of them, that Margot had spied on the hall table were for me, and I took no pleasure in them, although I could not have explained to any one why and in what they failed.

Those who love have a sixth sense which makes them better detectives than any who draw His Majesty's pay at Scotland Yard.

As love-letters, James's missives were unsatisfactory, although the terms used therein would have been absolutely efficacious as evidence in a case for breach of promise; unless, indeed, the handwriting being somewhat illegible, counsel might wrangle over the exact interpretation to put on the spidery scrawls that stood for binding expressions of attachment. Perhaps the canny writer had thought of that contingency?

I should not have thought of that myself a few months ago: my character was deteriorating under the strain of my life under Lady Violet's roof. And, as a matter of fact, the terms of our engagement left James in perfect freedom to jilt me if he should cease to care for me. I had not exacted fidelity, and he trusted me, and even if he intended to fail me, would have been sure to take me at my word, and write freely and fearlessly. The

measure of a man's respect for a woman is also the measure of her endurance and capacity for suffering; he is apt to draw the more heavily on it.

Lady Violet wrote, also, once, to bid me go up to town and find and despatch her sable stole. She wanted it, "for it was beginning to draw in very cold in the evenings." She volunteered this information to fill up the page, and the innocent remark filled me with blind rage. Why did she not stay decently below, as her age and infirmities warranted, during those hours sacred and tolerable only to juveniles? Ridiculous for an old, suffering, toddling woman to go up on deck after dinner and hang over taffrails like the heroine of a novel with the man of her heart—James, probably, who had got her her invitation on to his brother's yacht, and would naturally be deputed to beau her about and take all the trouble of her.

I laughed a grim laugh to myself, as I raised my glass of frothy champagne to my lips and wondered in what rough, classical, racy words old Ralph Hardman's dry humour would clothe his opinion of his relations' goings on.

I always carried James's two letters, such as they were, about with me, and read them under the table at dinner. The table was so large that each of us had a whole side to herself, and could have conned a lexicon without being observed if so minded. One page of the second letter was chock-full of Lady Violet's symptoms, which it irked me

that James should discuss so seriously, but which I now knew nearly by heart, *faute de mieux.*

He said that he thought I ought to force my patroness to consult a specialist, as soon as she returned to town. He owned that he did not put much faith in Dr Jenkins, with whom, however, he seemed to be on the best of terms. Lady Violet had then so far set her personal vanity aside as to allude to some very intimate details of her health to a man; he retailed them to me in a love-letter? Faugh!

I gave the letter a vixenish crumple in my hand and slipped it into my pocket—I always have a pocket, the other girls chaff me about it, and say that I am too old-fashioned ever to marry; probably they are right. Then I took a large helping of *paté de foie gras*, and began to talk feverishly. The others slackened off. It was a tacit convention between us that we were to amuse the kind old host; keep the ball of conversation a-rolling, and take each our part in listening to him assiduously. It was all he asked. He was thoroughly happy. About half-way through dinner he would lay down his knife and fork, tilt up his spectacles and have a good look at us all, and then murmur: "Three nice girls! I like to see their pleasant faces. I hope, ladies, you will all stay as long as you please—it will please me!"

"That's all he wants!" said Margot to me after dinner, when The Ladies had left The gentleman

to his wine. "Just to be cock of the walk. But to suggest introducing another man! Pooh, I daren't do it; it would break the whole thing up, like Beauty and the Beast when Beauty wanted to bring her relations along, and Psyche, too. No, no. Let's stay like this as long as we can; eh, girls?"

"I shall have to go back to my old woman some time," said I.

"Then we'll get Jehane down."

"I doubt if we can get Jehane," said Desdemona; "she is too independent. She prefers eating grass, and hates kow-towing to the rich."

"Neither would the rich like the sight of her at his board," said Margot. "Think of Jehane under all those Venetian girandoles, and in front of that rock crystal epergne thing, and reflected in all those mirrors! Oh no, she's far too untidy—and he's so very particular about certain things. Have you noticed the nails of the maids here? All manicured. And they are all left something in his will, if they are still in his service when he dies. Naturally, they never want to leave. Do you think he's very well to-night? Seems to me he's caught a little chill——"

"Make up the fire," said Desdemona, "and ring for some hot grog. Let's keep him warm and cheerful."

"I have often wondered what we'd do—in a certain case!" cogitated Margot. "You see, I have an imagination. The gardeners sleep out.

Dr Ferrars lives nearly a mile off; we keep no horses—no conveyance or trap of any sort, and the nearest neighbour is five miles away, and not friends with him, either. All the country-side cut him about Mariuscha, I believe."

"That was Mason's doing," said I. "She made the worst of it. I am glad she was sent away."

"We should jolly well not be here if *she* was still in possession," replied Margot. "Well, well, *I* have no interest in his dying just yet, but it's funny not to know even who his executors are."

She concluded this execrable speech just as our host came shuffling in. He did seem rather seedy, I thought, now that I looked at him, but he sat down in his armchair and asked Desdemona to play to him. She departed up into the musician's gallery, where the piano was placed, and soon the notes of some of Chopin's more agonising pieces stole down to us, and a little of the grimness of Ralph Hardman's face was eliminated from it. Desdemona played very well.

"I wish I had my music here," she wailed presently.

Mr Hardman answered, unexpectedly: "You will find plenty in a chest up there—or ought to be. My wife's music. . . . Mariuscha put it all in order——"

"Could my friend Mariuscha Lancaster play, Mr Hardman?" Margot asked insinuatingly.

"Mariuscha?—no, but Mrs Hardman could. The best wife ever man had——"

"Now he's launched!" whispered Margot; "and jolly badly he treated that best wife, if the truth were known. I'll see if I can get anything out of him——" She raised her voice. "Mariuscha always said that Mrs Hardman was so awfully good to her? (That's a lie, by the way.)"

"My wife was kind to everybody. She knew my liking for girls——"

"He! he!" giggled Margot, then aloud: "How nice of her to be so understanding! Wives so seldom grasp . . . and that sort of liking is so often misinterpreted——"

"But I was careful to explain it all to her Many men in my place would have just gone their own way, and ridden rough-shod over a woman's feelings, but that was not my way. I knew she was sensible enough to appreciate my taking her feelings into account, and good-natured enough to wish to indulge mine. She said to me, 'Ralph——'"

"Now we are getting at it!" observed Margot.

"'Ralph,' my dear said to me, 'one knows what ill-judged kindness to pretty girls leads to. You get a certain amount of satisfaction about having them always about you, but the girls get talked about, and I get laughed at—if I don't get despised. So the best way of solving that difficulty, it seems to me, is, instead of leaving you to fight it out without me, to help you to get the kind of society you like without doing anybody any harm, especially the girls. I know I have your heart'—she had

indeed — 'but it stands to reason that an old woman cannot diffuse that atmosphere of youth in the home that we both like. We will see a great many girls, we will study them, and we will adopt one of them — informally, so as not to spoil her by expectations——'"

"And you did finally select one?" asked Margot, almost bitterly. Mariuscha was being rehabilitated in the most complete and painful manner. He took no notice of her remark, but just rambled on. I thought it a most indecent proceeding, and longed to shut Margot up.

"My wife was a most truly exceptional woman. 'Ralph,' said she, 'I tell you what we will do, we will take up the girl together.' She was as good as her word. The young lady went about with us, stayed with us in town and country; my wife never made any objection to my frequent calls upon her in her home, and she came down here frequently, and did some little bits of work for me. . . . Then her family was ruined. . . . I procured a flat for her in a quiet neighbourhood——"

"And Mrs Hardman went to see her there?" Margot suggested incredulously.

"She did not go very often; she had such poor health that she persuaded me to pay her calls for her very largely, in the days when I did pay calls."

"A dozen to his one, I bet," said Margot. "What an absurdly complaisant old lady! Still,

I didn't know that she ever honoured her husband's 'mash' so far——"

"Margot, I can't stand this," I exclaimed.

"Sit down, then; though, really, Carrie, it is no business of yours what I choose to say to Mr Hardman. Besides, listen, he is talking away all of his own accord. Aren't you a *little* curious?"

"Yes," said I, "I am. Only, you are so coarse in your inferences——"

"I can't help it. I speak as I find. Hadn't you better stay and hear fair play?" she sneered. "What is all that he is reproaching himself with? Listen! I really do think he is very queer to-night."

To Margot's ire I spoke up and addressed our host. "I am afraid, Mr Hardman," I said, "that this conversation is rather too painful for you. Let us talk of something more cheerful—something to go to bed upon. Do you know, it is half-past eleven?"

"Carrie, you pig!" muttered Margot. "That clock is twenty minutes fast. Just when he was getting amusing. And he isn't minding you in the very least, luckily!"

He was not. He was talking quite fast, and rather loud, while Desdemona's soft playing reminded me of the faint undertone of the voluntary during the Creed, or like pale colours run on to lace.

"I am ashamed of one thing that I did," muttered the poor old man. "I gave away

what did not belong to me — I gave her my wife's necklace!"

"The emeralds!" said Margot in an awestruck whisper.

"Yes, I gave her my wife's necklace. I clasped it round her neck myself—in Sophia's presence—some devil possessed me—I still see my wife's eyes——"

"Well, this beats all!" murmured Margot Bligh.

"I wanted Sophia to object—to give me an excuse for taking it back—but she would not. She bade the girl, in her queenly manner, to keep it. . . ."

"And the girl kept it, you bet," said the artist.

"Shame on her!" said I, quite loudly.

"Nay; my wife made it so easy for her. She insisted on her keeping it — said it was of no particular value — hoped she would wear it for her sake. And the poor child believed her, she thinks it is paste. . . ."

"Rats!" muttered Margot.

"I believe it of her!" I cried. Mr Hardman heard neither of us.

"But she felt it—my wife did. The incident took place a couple of months before she left me. I wanted the necklace back—to put in her coffin——"

"And Mariuscha refused to part with it?" said I sadly.

"I told her what I wanted it for," said he, "and she naturally enough would not hear of it."

"She knew he would have had it up again in six months," said Margot. "And then you insinuate, Carrie, that she didn't know the value of it! That proves she did. If it had been of no value she would have been glad enough to gratify the old boy's morbid fancy. Did you ever see her again after that?" she asked him clearly.

"She came to me, here, after all was put away —covered over, finished. But it was an odd thing, I buried my liking for young girls' society in my dear wife's coffin. She had encouraged me, without her I did not seem to care about them."

"Rum thing to say," interposed Margot, "with the house full of samples!"

"And then in the absence of my dear wife, it did not look well in the eyes of the neighbourhood; it did not do. I found it would not work. Inferior natures carped and cavilled—Sophia has stood between me and that sort of thing all her life—when she was dead malicious tongues were loosed."

"Mason!" murmured Margot. He heard.

"Yes—Mason, damn her!" His head fell on his breast, and he said no more. He seemed awfully tired. I said to Margot, crossly:

"Well, haven't you done enough poking and prying for one evening? Your victim sleeps. And all you have got out of him is the fact that Mariuscha isn't so bad as we thought."

"Yes; it is quite nice to know that the late Mrs Hardman chaperoned Mariuscha to a certain

extent," retorted Margot, whom nothing could ever affront or perturb. "I should think Casimir Livingston might get over his objection to Mariuscha's windfall — if that story is true? — supposing he knew these extenuating circumstances which I have been instrumental in bringing to light, with every possible impediment from you, by the way. And that good old Desdemona playing away like an angel up there!"

"It strikes me I haven't heard her for a while," said I, running upstairs into the loft. Coming down again, I reported: "She's asleep, with her head on the keys."

"Funny, how little interested Desdemona is in the things of the moment!" meditated Margot. "Now, as a novelist, one would think she would have been on the tiptoe of curiosity to hear the scene we've been assisting at. Most dramatic, wasn't it? Although I am an artist, I consider that I have a very strong histrionic bias; it is a mere chance that I wasn't an actress or a novelist. Mr Hardman has always struck me as a very picturesque figure. Queer mixture of paganism and puritanism his face is—have you ever noticed that? How well it comes this minute!"

"Rather sunken in, somehow," said I. "You wouldn't like to paint his portrait as he looks now, would you?"

"I don't know, it is characteristic. The features are sharpened and more clear-cut than usual,

don't you think? His nose is spread more. He always has that half-sly, half-childish look, he must have been quite a 'cute man of business in his time to get all this wealth together; and yet he is simple, and any woman can do what she likes with him, from the respectable point of view. I don't suppose he looks upon us as anything but a breed of long-haired undergraduates, and would grant us the Suffrage at once."

"Why do you always talk, then, as if he had led Mariuscha astray?"

"*Façon de parler!*" said Margot, giving one of the true apologies of all scandalmongers. "It saves trouble. And, besides, I am sure it wasn't Mariuscha's fault if he didn't. I do wonder, really, what it is he has done for her? After all, we know nothing for certain, it is only gossip. Perhaps the necklace is all that Mariuscha has got for her pains? I wonder if he has left us three anything? Golly, what wouldn't I give to know?"

"I don't want anything."

"What a lie! Well, well, we shall see some day. One of us will, anyway, one who is absent. Meantime I am abominably sleepy. Why should not we go to bed?"

"We must wake him first."

"I don't see that it is our business to valet him."

"The servants are all gone to bed. We can't leave him asleep in his chair all night. We ought to wake him."

"Well, why don't you?"

I had a great objection to that job, and I tried to make Margot see that it was her province, and she as stoutly refused. But I agreed to go and wake Desdemona and get *her* to do it. Once in the organ-loft, it occurred to me that I would ask Desdemona to play a crashing chord or two. Desdemona, when she thoroughly came awake, obligingly gave us several crashing alarms, but to no avail, Mr Hardman slept on.

"I simply can't make any more noise than that," she called down to us, "I've sat on the piano."

"Can't you shake him?" she asked languidly, coming down the ladder, and joining the little group of perplexed women.

"I don't like to shake my host; it seems so rude," was my lame excuse.

"Well, he doesn't look so very comfortable," observed Desdemona. "See how oddly he is hunched up!"

"One of us ought to bawl in his ear," said Margot, quite determined, however, not to be the one to perform this operation. We all three stood there looking at him; we could not bear the idea of touching the poor old thing, somehow, and, instead of bawling at him, we all began to talk in whispers.

"Suppose we let him alone!" suggested Margot at last. "It won't really hurt him to lie there all night. It is summer, after all!"

"Think of that cold two o'clock in the morning,

when people die easiest! And he has a chill on him, too! No, I don't see how we can leave him," I said.

"No, I don't really see how you *can* leave him!" said Desdemona, beginning to sidle towards the door of the room. Margot said nothing; she looked thoroughly frightened. I conquered my reluctance, and, as a beginning, took his limp hand that hung by his side. It was coldish—a queer kind of coldness. . . .

"What is it, Carrie? My dear girl, you look so awfully funny!"

"Nothing!" said I; "but, if you ask me, I believe Mr Hardman is dead!"

"You idiot!" said Margot, roughly adding: "You don't mean that you really think that?" She looked as if she was going to run away.

"I have never seen any one dead," I answered slowly, "but—just feel!"

"Not for worlds!" exclaimed Margot, glaring stupidly, all her debonnairness gone at once. "But—he certainly looks very odd! Oh, Carrie, I am frightened!"

"I'm going to faint!" piped Desdemona.

"Keep where you are, then, and do as you like," said I; "I must go and call the servants."

I made a step towards the door, but Margot retained me. "I will not—I can't be left alone with it," she said.

"Well, then, you go and tell them, I don't mind staying."

"If I can walk," said she; "my legs are like two concertinas."

She tottered to the door, and in her nervousness switched off all the lights, so that we were left in complete darkness. All the sound I heard was the noise of Desdemona's conventional hysterics from the window-seat at the other end of the room, where she had thrown herself. It seemed ages. I sought and took hold of the cold hand again. I felt as if we had all been so unkind to him, and that to conquer my reluctance was to make him some sentimental amends. I did not mind so much now that the first shock was over, and the growing chill of his hand proclaimed the truth of our dreadful surmise.

Margot did not come back again. I waited there for a good half-hour, practically alone, for the noise of Desdemona was no sort of comfort to me, and at the end of that time some one turned on the lights and a glare smote my blinking eyes, as I raised them to Dr Ferrars' face.

## CHAPTER XV

"NOW, what's all this?" he asked nervously.

Desdemona chose that moment to give a wild whoop, and went off into honest hysterics, to which her previous efforts had been merely the preface. It was disconcerting, and I suppose my eyes were a little queer, for the doctor looked as if he expected me to fly at him.

"Is there nobody here who has got any sense?" he asked, and I answered quite gravely: "Nobody but me."

"Get that screeching dolt out of the room, then," he said, "and send my coachman to me—get somebody to hold the horse."

I obeyed him, and having stowed Desdemona safely in her own room and turned the key on her, returned to find that the doctor and his man had managed to lay Mr Hardman on his bed, which, luckily, was on the ground floor, not far from the octagon room. Ferrars came to meet me there, nervously taking hold of my hand.

"Look here," he said. "He's dead, of course. You were here when he died. Tell me about it."

I told him.

"It's heart failure—pretty obviously," he went on. "But I don't like to give a certificate. There had better be an inquest. Now, who's in the house?"

"Three girls and one bedridden old woman."

"Relations?"

"None of us."

"Bless my soul! Do you mean—— Who am I to send for, then?"

"I cannot tell you."

"What a queer thing! Was he——?" He touched his forehead. "I know nothing of him; I have never been called in before; but I've seen him about in the lanes often enough. But he must have relations?"

"Yes, he has relations. My mistress, Lady Violet Barnes, is his first cousin, but she is yachting in the Hebrides, and couldn't be got hold of. Another relation, Canon Barling, is bedridden, and has a daughter who can't leave him. There's a boy, a very distant relative, who was here once, but he's only fifteen."

"That's not much good. Who were Mr Hardman's solicitors?"

"I never heard."

"Then who *is* to be sent for?" He put his hand to his head. It was a bit of a fix.

"I am sorry I can't help you."

"Has he made a will?"

"I happen to know that he has."

He looked down at me quite suspiciously. "Who drew it?"

"He drew it himself."

"Perhaps, as you know so much, you happen to know where it is?"

"In that drawer," said I, pointing to a little table in a corner of the room. It was a mean little table—Dutch—not even English marquetry; you would never look at it twice. "If what my mistress, Lady Violet, told me he told her is still true, the will is there, in the right-hand drawer, which is unlocked."

"Good heavens!"

"I suppose he thought no one would ever look for an important document in such an obvious place."

"Oh, that's what you think!" said Ferrars testily. "Well, I suppose it is my duty to look and see if I can find out from it who is appointed executor? You had better see me open it. . . ."

He hesitated. He was rather a nice little man, although he was disposed to snub me while asking for my help. I didn't mind. It was a horrid hole he was in. The will was there; I felt certain, somehow, that Mr Hardman had never moved it since the day five years ago when he had told Lady Violet, chuckling, that he had written his will on a half-sheet of notepaper and left it lying about in a drawer. Margot had been sitting with the back of her chair jammed against the very drawer all last evening. I am sure that if I had

been "friendly," as she called it, and betrayed the secret to her, that she would not have been able to keep her hands off the key to the perennial mystery of the affair of the Hardman succession. I must own that I now felt a tremor of expectation, doomed to be disappointed, when Dr Ferrars, who had taken a turn round the room, suddenly came back to my side, and ejaculated:

"No; on second thoughts I won't touch the thing. I prefer to leave it to the coroner. Here, give us some sealing-wax, and we will seal up the drawer till the morning. You have peeped, I suppose?"

"No," I said; "and I have not told some people where to find it who were very anxious to know."

He did not commend me for my discretion, but affixed the great seal of Cardinal Vitelleschi, which I selected for him from Mr Hardman's collection, to the drawer, and went for his hat.

"I have to attend an inquest to-morrow morning, or rather, to-day, at the 'Blue Pig.' I'll look up the coroner's officer on my way home, and I daresay I shall be able to get the same jury up here some time in the course of the day, when they are through with Mrs Blue Pig. She died a natural death enough, like Mr Hardman, but it's as well to be careful. Now you go to bed. Nobody's to touch anything, mind!"

"I am sure I don't want to touch anything——" I began, but he interrupted me.

"Now, don't you get cross. You have been very

good and quite useful—a contrast to those other idiots. One's at my house—the one that came to fetch me. My sister kept her, gave her a shake-down on the sofa."

"But why?"

"Fool! Said she couldn't sleep in the house with a dead body!"

"Lots of people feel like that," said I. "I shall lie down, but I don't expect to sleep."

"You will. Good-bye for the present."

And I did. I slept till eleven o'clock. I was still in my room when Dr Ferrars sent up a message for me to come down. I obeyed him, and found twelve fat men and true in possession of the octagon room, with bits of clean blotting-paper in front of them. They had already been into the next room to view the body.

"This young lady," said little Ferrars, beaming on me, "has a fairly good head on her shoulders. She knows where the will is. Miss Courtenay, will you give Mr—Ditchwater the information he requires?"

"Certainly," I replied. "Mr Hardman's will is in this room, to the best of my knowledge."

I spoke boldly, but I felt that I should look very foolish supposing Mr Hardman had seen fit to remove the document. Such a *contretemps* was quite within the bounds of possibility, for it was quite two years since Lady Violet had passed his confidence on to me. But no, it was all right; a very mean-looking piece of paper was taken out

of the drawer by Mr Ditchwater—it was lying on the top—and I could see the superscription in large untidy letters: "My Will."

"This seems simple enough," said Ditchwater. "Everything of which Mr Ralph Hardman died possessed is bequeathed to Miss Mary Anna Lancaster, and she is appointed joint executor with Mr Casimir Livingston. Does any one know where these two persons live?"

"I do," I answered, and again the doctor beamed on me as I gave the addresses of Mariuscha and her lover.

The order for burial was given, and the coroner and his men departed. Ferrars had an urgent case hard by, and could not drive back just yet, so I volunteered to go to the village and send two telegrams, the substance of which had been dictated to me previously:

"*Your presence necessary Mr Hardman dead.*"

I altered nor added nothing. But I wondered if either of the two knew who his fellow-executor would be!

I sat down to lunch alone. "Do you mind being left?" Ferrars had asked me, with a note of sympathy in his voice. He was too busy to stop. Desdemona was still in bed, Margot was with Miss Ferrars; the doctor was to bring her back at five, when he had promised to be here to meet either or both of the executors, should they elect to come down by the only quick train from town.

Though I assured him I did not mind being left, I found the mournful house very oppressive, and sooner than sit still and do nothing, I thought I would put on my hat and walk the mile that lay between Hardman Hall and the little branch railway that served us. Should Mariuscha come alone I knew that she would not object to my company on the walk back; and if Casimir Livingston happened to be in the train too, my presence might prevent some little awkwardness.

I was there an hour too soon. I walked up and down that macadamised platform in the sweltering sunlight until I began to feel that nothing in the world mattered except that train and its freightage. Would one come? Would two come? Would neither of them come?

The little "potty train," as Margot called it, for there were generally not more than three coaches to it, was late. Mariuscha got out of one of the carriages, and Livingston out of another. Yet they could hardly have failed to see each other at the junction?

Mariuscha had no luggage, only a small despatch box in her hand. She was not in mourning, but she always wore dark things, and managed to look restful and cool on this hot September day.

"Carrie, my poor child, how pale you look!" she said kindly. "Can we get a fly here?"

"There is one just going, that brought some people in," I replied. I suspected that her nice

thought of the fly was for me; she had meant to walk.

"Casimir, will you collar it for us, please, then?"

Eagerly, grey coat-tails flying, he performed her behest, and after carefully putting us in, was just raising his hat, when Mariuscha interposed:

"My dear boy, you must come with us. There's no other conveyance, and I expect you are going to the same place?"

Livingston silently obeyed her, and the carriage door closed on us, and we were soon bowling through the lanes. What a long way it seemed, far longer than when I walked it! I watched his face as he sat uncomfortably opposite us in the fly. He looked older. Well, one cannot stay a pink baby for ever! Even now he was ruddier than Mariuscha, whose skin reminded me more than ever of magnolia blossom or white Castille soap

Presently Mariuscha fell to questioning me, rather perfunctorily, I thought, concerning the manner of Mr Hardman's decease. I found her *sangfroid* somewhat rather appalling, from a sentimental point of view, but soothing and restful after the screeching of Desdemona, and the vulgar acerbities of Margot Bligh. I could not have repeated to her what was in my mind, and that was the brutal conversation we had held only a few hours ago with the man that was now lying dead, and the coarseness of its present application. Thank goodness, Margot had been the worst!

Therefore, she would not tell. I simply said that he had died in our midst. The truth was too grotesque, and out of all harmony with these two urbane yet tragic personages going so earnestly and quietly to meet the embarrassments and obstructions that awaited them. They seemed to me as pitiful as they were gorgeous. Mariuscha's beauty, which never was more noticeable than now, was the dominant note, her *raison d'être*, her apology in both our eyes. His attitude was, of course, undefined to me; he was simply a young man summoned to the death of an old man he had loved and respected. What was hers?

We drove into the grounds through the pillared gate, by the orchard, and over the moat, and past the dovecot—all Mariuscha's! Did she know it? A large party, as it seemed to me, was gathered in the porch to meet us: Desdemona, with a soft lace scarf thrown over her shoulders; Margot, smiling blandly and looking as if she wanted to cry Hip, hip, hooray! and all the four servants. It was disgusting. I thought they really might have been better employed indoors and minding their own several businesses. The sort of triumphal arch nonsense, was, of course, Margot's idea, and most indecent, though I must admit that Mariuscha looked splendid, like a queen coming to receive obeisance from her subjects. Livingston looked fine, too. I don't suppose that porch had sheltered two such magnificent specimens since its feudal days.

Margot afterwards declared that they appeared to her as something classical; Apollo and Diana, a god-like brother and sister.

She was happy, at any rate. She poured out tea, and chattered away in a welcoming strain without a trace of awkwardness. I suppose we ought all to have been grateful to her for helping us over it so well. Then Dr Ferrars, who had come in, spoke up nervously. I pitied him. There was no reason why he should have undertaken it. He is a decent sort, and didn't mind going out of his way to help a bit, I suppose.

"Now, young people! . . . I thought I would let you have your tea in peace first. . . . I suppose Miss Courtenay has told you—what you are here for. You are both executors under Mr Hardman's will, and Miss Lancaster is sole legatee."

Young Livingston rose. He was very red. The tea-party perforce melted away. (Margot melted with reluctance.) I was getting out of my basket chair, not so easy, when a movement of Mariuscha's hand arrested me. . . .

Mr Livingston was so upset that he never looked to see if he had an audience or no.

"I had no idea of this," he was saying; "and, Dr Ferrars—I must decline to have anything to do with it."

"You mean that you renounce probate?" said Ferrars. "That's the legal expression."

"If that is what it means, I do mean it," he exclaimed, vehemently and unsteadily. "And"—

he looked round for his hat—"it seems to me that I have nothing more to do here——"

"Casimir!" said Mariuscha appealingly. "Don't go, anybody. May I just speak a word to Mr Livingston?" She went up to him and laid her hand on his raging arm. "Casimir!" she said gently, and the gentleness of Mariuscha was a thing to remember. "Casimir, isn't it enough to have renounced *me*? You have done that. This is such a little thing. . . . Stay and see me through!"

He said coldly: "Very well, then, if you wish it."

"Thank you," she said. "Then—the very first thing to do, it seems to me, is to look through things and discover if some newer and more suitable will does not exist."

"Bravo!" exclaimed Ferrars. "A most sensible suggestion, and, coming from Miss Lancaster, most creditable. Why, he may have altered it a dozen times over, since——"

"And the latest may perhaps be less favourable —to me," said Mariuscha. "Let us hope for the best. Meantime, do you think I might venture to have a cigarette?"

## CHAPTER XVI

"CARRIE," said Mariuscha, "I am fearfully dusty. I must wash."

I took her to the room assigned to her. It was the Beam Room, the biggest, the most haunted room in the house, that none of us liked to sleep in, from the two causes of humility and fear. Even the intrepid Margot had been averse from occupying it. "It's full of snags," she had said. "And if once one got running away from a ghost, those oak beams would trip one up."

The beams in question represented the upper props of the roof of King Henry's Hall, the main apartment of the old manor house where knights had feasted and minstrels sung and ladies listened.

The dark, shiny wood looked very odd, growing out of the carpet, as it were, and dividing the room uncomfortably in half. The bed itself, with its heavy blue tester, supported by chains from ceiling, would have held four people, and yet the incongruous door of this apartment was so low that you could hardly get in without hitting your head. Taken in all, that Beam Room has been the joy of Mr Hardman's heart. It was, therefore, the

proper room to put his heiress in, and I believe Margot had taken a malicious pleasure in ordering her box to be carried up there.

Only Mariuscha had no box.

"I didn't bring it. A touch of decent feeling!" said she. "I will send for it to-morrow. Meantime, Carrie, you must lend me a nightgown."

In her bag was something of far greater importance to her, though—enough cigarettes to last her for twenty-four hours—and in less than half an hour from her entry into the house, she was installed in the long, low window-seat that ran all round the south side of the room, and had bidden me to "tell the girls that she would be glad to see them."

"I know they are both dying to investigate me and my attitude," she said, "and it is as well to get it over. I'll back Margot to say more tactless things in a minute than you would get said in a year. Here they come! Margot modest, Desdemona deprecating! They have abused me like a pickpocket, now they bow before me like a queen. It is wonderful, isn't it? what money does. How can I respect anybody, except you, Carrie? You are straight—as straight as me."

She prided herself on her integrity, strange woman!

They kissed her solemnly; Mariuscha, carelessly gracious, offered us all cigarettes and a seat. If we had had a great sheet of embroidery between us the illusion would have been complete, of a queenly chatelaine and her ancillary maidens—

a chatelaine who had just borrowed a nightgown of one of them and a pair of shoes of another, but who had brought her own tooth-brush.

"Delighted to lend you anything, Mariuscha, dear," Margot, who had been requisitioned for the foot-gear, exclaimed, bringing three pairs in her hands. "Are any of these small enough? I fear not."

"You flatter me!" said Mariuscha, holding out her well-proportioned foot for Margot to try the shoes on for her. To see Margot kneeling humbly before the woman she had scandalised and abused for all these years was very enjoyable. She was in the seventh heaven, but a little anxious until she knew whether the new proprietress meant to take on the late owner's unfinished commission for a five-foot canvas of the Hall or no. She wished now she had not played Penelope, and had finished it and secured the five hundred pounds before he died. Women are so much harder to deal with. I could almost see these thoughts passing through her mind, and so, I expect, did Mariuscha.

She babbled congratulations. I expected to see Mariuscha kick her like the barbarian king Dagobert as she drivelled on. "But, Mariuscha, dear, how wonderfully it has all turned out! What an extraordinary world it is for things happening—nice things, delightful things! Here you are, the mistress of Hardman Hall, as we all suspicioned you would be, and as you ought to be. You will do such a lot of good with it all."

"Oh, I'm not philanthropic," said Mariuscha. "But I shall be able to gratify my personal tastes."

"And Art is one of them, isn't it, dear?"

"More or less," said the heiress. "I like old masters, I own."

"Surely, dear, you must love actuality! You, who are so strong, so alive, so jolly——"

"Oh, stow it, Margot! I am not jolly; I am particularly depressed, if you must know."

"Because Mr Livingston did not congratulate you?" said Desdemona quietly. "Well, you could hardly expect it, could you? It is a little awkward for him—the situation in which the will has placed him—or, at least, I thought so."

"You women who write are always looking out for situations. There are far fewer in life than you imagine."

"Well, he contrived to put you in the wrong, somehow," said Margot bluntly. "I just heard the tail of what he said."

"Did he? I was unaware of it. But Englishmen are always grumpy when they are suddenly thrust into an official position of any kind."

"And, after all," I could not help saying, "we all have enough to depress us; there is somebody lying dead in the house."

"Oh, Carrie!" exclaimed Margot. "Why do you remind one? We were all so jolly here, I had almost forgotten. You have spoilt it all."

"Well," said Desdemona wearily, perfunctorily,

as if making a set speech previously arranged between her and Margot, "I suppose I ought to go and pack?"

"So ought I," said Margot, making a terribly long face, also rehearsed beforehand.

"Sit still!" commanded Mariuscha. "What do yon want to pack up for?"

"We must clear out, I suppose? This is your house."

"No need," said Mariuscha laconically. "Even if it *is* my house—and we are not quite certain of that—you can stay, anybody who wants to. There is room enough for us all. Please stay here as long as you like—all except Carrie, and she is to stay as long as *I* like!"

I was flattered, but I felt rather sorry for the others, on the reception of this blunt form of snub, and muttered: "I must go as soon as Lady Violet comes home."

"You seem to have got very fond of Carrie all of a sudden!" said Margot. "But, after all, why not? I don't care, for now I can finish my 'pic.,' and Art overrides jealousy." She grinned good-humouredly.

"Yes, finish your picture, and I'll buy it," said Mariuscha.

"Isn't there anything you can buy of mine?" Desdemona enquired slily—she had these flashes of intelligence now and then. She continued: "Yes, thank you, Mariuscha, you know I'll be very glad to stay a little. I, too, have something

to finish, and I find that this is a splendid place for encouraging one's powers of composition."

"Good soil for nightingales!" said Mariuscha. "I shall like to have you. Of course, I shan't take any notice of you, you must just go on as if I wasn't here. I am sorry there is only one young man among the three."

"And he's took!" remarked Margot quite gaily. "I say, I keep forgetting that this is a house of mourning——"

"You will think me peculiar," said Mariuscha quite gravely, "but I tell you that I don't think it is an occasion for grief, when an old, weary, widowed man, in the fullness of years, goes down, and joins his fathers, decently and in order. It isn't as if he had been cut off by an accident. 'Oh, thou soft natural death, joint twin to sleep.' He didn't suffer a minute, or think of dying, so Carrie tells me. He just fell back, wearied, on to the earth from which he came, and where his bones are to be laid, and I don't see why we educated women should pretend to be horrified at anything so natural. . . ."

Margot quivered with shame at the thought of her frenzied hour on the doctor's sister's sofa, which would certainly have incurred the wholesale condemnation of her present idol. "You are so delightfully unconventional, Mariuscha!" she muttered.

"I am a stoic. Why should I be afflicted for

one who is either happy or nothing? If he is happy, then 'tis I am envious, while it is nothing short of madness to lament the fate of a nonentity!"

"Who said that?" enquired Desdemona, scenting a quotation.

"Seneca."

"Gracious!"

"I can give you more of that sort of thing, if you like. Did you ever hear of the architects of the Temple who begged Apollo to reward them as was best? The oracle told them to spend seven days in rejoicing, and on the night their reward would come."

"What was it?"

"They died in sleep."

"Where on earth did you mug all this up?" said Margot, adding in a loud aside: "And why should she take on about Mr Hardman's death, indeed—the person who had everything to gain by it! Well, come along, Desdemona, and let us unpack, much nicer job than the other. We will thank dear Mariuscha and be off—leave the princess with her favourite maid of honour; it's Carrie's turn now. I don't mind, I have the artist's divine detachment, I only care for my 'pic.'"

When the queer little door near the bed-head had closed behind this compound of indelicacy and good soul that was Margot Bligh, Mariuscha put away her cigarette.

"Carrie," she said, "I didn't want to ask you before them, but where is He?"

"In the Blue Room. I was wondering——"

"Why I didn't ask before? Can you take me to him? I don't want that coarse Shetland pony of a woman to know that I asked to see him. I like her to think me hard and odious."

I appreciated this mood of hers, somehow, and like persons engaged on some nefarious errand we flew across open spaces and slid along passages until we came to the quiet, grey room where poor old Mr Hardman lay. It was darkened so carefully that we had entered and closed the door behind us before we realised that the room was not empty. Livingston was there, and he had just placed a large bunch of white lilies that had been brought down from London on the breast of the dead man. He raised his sad eyes as we came in, but did not move. He was on the other side of the bed; his well-coloured skin and healthy flesh tones contrasted noticeably with the general paleness of grey face and white sheet.

Mariuscha looked at the flowers he had laid down. "I wish I had thought of that!" she said softly. Then she stooped and kissed the cold forehead.

Livingston watched her. It was easy to see that he did not look on her action as profanation or consider her kiss as a Judas tribute, or expect to see blood well forth from the nostrils of her dead benefactor. I longed for those two to take hands over the bed, and for the woman to abjure her

unlawful inheritance for the sake of the great love of which her beautiful eyes were full. But she said nothing, she stayed still. Mariuscha had the power of staying still longer than any woman I ever knew. Then, with a small, slow head-shake, of which I believe she was unconscious, she left the room.

## CHAPTER XVII

AN up-and-down search of the most exhaustive kind failed to bring to light anything of the nature of a testamentary disposition in the handwriting of the late Mr Hardman. Mary Anna Lancaster was the undisputed heiress of his property, as bequeathed to her on the little half-sheet of note-paper. She had to take his name. There was the notorious old Mason's legacy and some trifling bequests to people in the village, chiefly dependants or *protégées* of his late wife's, and substantial gifts to the four female servants, including the cook, whom I had never seen. Neither had Mariuscha, I gathered. She certainly carried the policy of *laisser faire* to its utmost extent. Everything went on as usual. The four maids worshipped her. No wonder! Margot painted. Desdemona scribbled. I sewed. I often, at Mariuscha's request, took my work, and sat in the octagon room beside her and her sulky co-executor, as they sat bored and busy with a maze of papers spread out on the table in front of them. I ought not to say sulky, but he was sad, and evidently loathed his unsolicited task of writing letters,

paying bills, hunting up creditors, and all the dreary duties undertaken in connection with the inheritance he abhorred.

One morning I heard the name of George Grant—the boy that pinched me—and gathered that Mariuscha had offered to pay for his education at Eton.

"A sop to Livingston," I thought, "and Livingston won't accept it!"

George Grant's people did, though. They were evidently not at all averse to profiting by the remorse of the usurper.

"His people write like cads," Mariuscha said, hiding a hideous-coloured letter in her hand. "I am sure he isn't a nice boy, and won't even take the polish of Eton I am going to give him!"

"What matter of that?" asked Livingston wearily.

"You consider him the rightful heir?" said she lightly.

"He is. There is not a doubt of it."

"And ought to be here instead of me?"

"Certainly. In equity."

"And so, Casimir, for the sake of an artificial system of equity based upon some old laws of savagery—for that's all it is—you prefer to snub me and lose me! Well, I am not going to go down upon my knees to you to take me—though that's savage, too, and might appeal to you, when sheer good arguments fail—and yet, I don't know that I am not capable of it."

Her tall figure bent as she stood beside him

at the table; in another moment her head, with its rolling black hair, was on his knee. I was in the room all the time, but a curious trait in Mariuscha was her utter, indecent, want of self-consciousness. He forgot me, too. He looked down on her for a moment, and then, flinging away from her, laid his head on the table. He raised it a moment later; his eyes were red and bloodshot.

"I cannot. Please get up. I hate you to be kneeling to me, when it ought to be I who——"

"Yes, and why don't you?" said she, rising. "The parts are reversed with us, unfortunately. Why can't you see the thing as I do?"

"I wish to God you could make me!"

"If I were better-looking, perhaps I could," the girl said cynically. "Your stubbornness is a great reflection on my powers of persuasion."

"Good heavens, it isn't that! You——"

"No, I know it isn't that. Don't be so stupid, Casimir; it was only something to get me off my knees, as they say on the stage. Isn't he absurd, Carrie? I am the woman he wants, and he won't take me because I happen to have some sense—and a head on my shoulders. If he were a Frenchman, now, he would seize the advantage of having a wife with a good head for business. I see it all. There's nobody, really, between me and my dear old friend's kindness. Why can't we take it all as he meant it—*en tout bien, tout honneur.* He cared for nobody but

me. And we can leave it all to George Grant, if we die without having any children."

Livingston rose, took his hat, and went out.

"You drove him away with that last remark," I could not help saying.

"Why? Was it wrong?"

"He is an Englishman."

"Well, I am always knocking up against them and their prejudices, somehow," complained Mariuscha, one of whose most innocent weaknesses was her affectation of a predominant foreign strain. "A man who won't marry Me because of a prejudice! Good Lord!"

"It is more than that," I said hastily, and then repented of my incaution and the explanations it entailed, for Mariuscha was down on me in a moment.

"What more is it?" she begged.

"Well, dear, excuse me, you speak so easily of all things connected with—you seem proud of not being particular — about morals — and, of course, it *is* rather different from the way his mother and sisters would regard such questions. They would make a point of being shy when they have to speak of divorces, and not talk willingly of '*liaisons*' and 'naughty old men,' and all that sort of thing. He considers, of course, that the next thing to casually discussing an act, is doing it, and your relations with Mr Hardman have been — considerably misinterpreted, haven't they?"

"I should think so! Margot gained a reputation for being good company on them; she has seen that my misdeeds percolated properly into every house where she had the *entrée*. But, Carrie, you are right about me: I do think those sort of things you speak of are not so very important among the other business that makes up life, such as getting fed and clothed and a roof over one. But, as a matter of fact, I am quite good."

"I know you are. Heroism without risk—respectability without morals!"

"But to be respectable when one doesn't think it any harm to be the other thing is surely far more difficult—and unlikely? It is like living in a country where there are no hedges, one is tempted to trespass at every turn and never knows when one is doing it, either. At the same time, if Casimir can't be persuaded to marry me, I am prepared—— But I shall shock you?"

"Yes, if you finish your sentence. Don't, for I understand you. But he never will."

"Then we are best apart. We should be paddling in the divorce court before we knew where we were."

"Did I hear the word divorce?" said Margot, eagerly coming in.

"Yes, but it is not imminent as yet. Tell me, girls, how does the present arrangement of the household strike you?"

"Perfect," we agreed.

"Then you will think I am right in arranging

to keep on the establishment on the present footing without any change. I have re-engaged the four maids and the cook, and I have promised never to set foot in my own kitchen until something goes wrong."

"What an opportunity for them to 'do' you!" ejaculated Margot.

"Not if I keep my part of the bargain, and I mean to."

"You *are* a cure!" said Margot again.

"No, only lazy. I know when to let well alone, and well is what gives me no trouble. If they like to 'do' me, mildly, to the tune of good cookery and good service, I have no objection. Live and let live. We all peculate, in our degree."

Margot sneered uncomfortably. Mariuscha had a way of divining the bitter reflection that would be likely to rise to the tongue of the other, and getting in front of her with it. I left them and sought Livingston in the rock garden, where I knew he had gone.

He was stooping tenderly over the yellow flowers of *Tropæolum polyphyllum* growing out of tree lupine, a plant in which Mr Hardman had taken a great interest. He wasn't, I was glad to see, the sort of young man who goes out in his rage after an unpleasant interview and slashes off the heads of poppies or any tall flower that is within range of his stick.

He raised his head gently as I approached, and

waited for me to speak. I did, with difficulty. I had set myself a task.

"Mr Livingston," I said, "you have never asked me for any information about your friend's last hours, yet I was there all the time. . . ."

"I did not want to distress you," said he; "but, of course, I should like to know how it all happened. Come and sit in the arbour."

"Mr Hardman," I said, "talked a good deal before he died."

"Poor fellow! Wildly, I suppose?"

"No, not wildly, very much to the purpose. He told us all about his first acquaintance—with Miss Lancaster."

His face grew set. "Miss Courtenay, I would rather——"

"Try not to look stony," I said, "or else you will make it too hard for me to tell you what I am sure you ought to know. Mr Hardman told us what great friends his wife had always been with Mariuscha, and how she had taken her about with her everywhere, and treated her like a daughter."

"He was the best gentleman in the world."

"And he loved the young. It was a great and wholly innocent joy to him to have a bright young girl about the place."

"A bright young girl should not have profited!"

"He was infatuated with her."

"So am I infatuated with her—but I don't mean to profit."

"I know men hate marrying heiresses—but

more if they are poor themselves—and you are not poor. And really and truly, I think Mariuscha cares for you."

"I know she does. Very well, then, it is quite simple. She has only to cede these unrighteous gains—unearned, you say they are—give them up to the boy who has the right to them, and let me keep her. That is the way I see it. I may be pig-headed——"

"You are."

"You'll find every man the same—on a point of honour. Women don't see these things in the same light——"

"I beg your pardon, I do."

"*You* think she ought to give it all up?"

"I should, if it was me—but that's a question of taste merely. I think she is not bound to do so in law."

"No, she has the law on her side. Well, but there it is; I am proud, I can't marry money. I am here to administer the thing that parts us, in her behalf, and a damned business it is. Was any man ever bound to such a treadmill?"

"Oh, we all have our treadmill," said I, thinking of my personal worry. "Only when my own affairs go most crooked I seem to want to make other people's go straight."

"It is very good of you, dear Miss Courtenay, and I see you have a kind heart; but in this game, do you see? only two can play, and we are both resolved——"

"It is Margot Bligh who has poisoned your mind," I said uncontrollably, for I could see that he believed some of the things she had had set about, and it enraged me.

"Fancy talking in the twentieth century of poisoned minds or wells!" said he, laughing grimly. "No, Margot Bligh is a gossip, but she told me nothing I did not know, or infer. I won't have people inferring things about my wife."

He turned away. I looked towards the house and saw Margot at that very moment issuing forth. I thought of going and taking her by the false hand and forcing her to repeat to Mr Livingston the substance of the rehabilitating conversation she had held with Mr Hardman in our presence, on the night before his death, but the current of my thoughts were changed by the sight of the bistre-coloured envelope she bore in her hand. Margot always collared telegrams, as a possible means of sensation; she likes to be in at the death.

"For me?" I said, opening it. It was from my mistress.

"*Home tomorrow be there.*"

"We must cut you some flowers," said Margot hospitably, "for you to take up to your old woman. I'll speak to Jenkyns."

## CHAPTER XVIII

THE flowers—poor, flappy autumn things!—died in the train. I left their dead bodies, along with the sandwiches I, somehow, could not eat, behind in the carriage at Waterloo. No one met me, naturally. I gathered up my bag and my rug, sent on my box by "Carted Luggage," and sought the underground station at Westminster, which conveyed me to Praed Street. I took good care not to make my bag heavy, but it was a pretty fair pull, all the same, to Dampier Square.

By the time my hand was on the bell-pull it was dusk, yet I could see that the doorstep was properly bath-stoned, a detail that servants first omit when a household is overtaken by any form of catastrophe. Neither were the blinds universally down, yet I trembled as the bell resounded through what sounded like empty corridors and carpetless stairs, and positively feared to look on the face of Staples, what time the open door should disclose that well-known mask of self-satisfaction and insolence.

There was, however, no perceptible change on that face, as I asked breathlessly: "Lady Violet

all right, Staples? Which room is she sitting in?"

"Yes, miss, all right," answered Staples, with I know not what unusual inflection of kindliness and commiseration. "In the morning-room. Colonel Lisbon is with her."

"Ah, then, I can run upstairs and take my things off before going in to her," I said nervously, forgetting that it was hardly necessary for Lady Violet's companion—I was still that, I suppose?—to justify the details of her conduct to Lady Violet's parlour-maid. I flew upstairs as if some devil was waiting to confront me on every landing, and busied myself in deliberately reoccupying my room. I could not unpack, for my box was not due until to-morrow. As time went on, it became a sort of fixed idea with me that I would contrive to wait upstairs until James's call came to an end, and so not see him this day at all. God knows how I longed to see him! And perhaps I had misconstrued his action, after all. He might have elected to visit Lady Violet on this day because he had somehow or other been told of my expected arrival? . . . It was a sign of affection? . . . No; my instinct told me this was not so, and that in sober truth Caroline Courtenay, whom he pretended to love, counted for nothing in his plans.

My loneliness and sense of unjust deprivation came over me in a great wave, and I cried childishly, leaning out over the window-sill into the mews, on the principle of the school-boy

who dared not smoke into the room for fear of the authorities. I had no authorities to pander to, but it would never have done for Staples to hear the sound of sobs as she passed my door on her way to turn down Lady Violet's coverlid.

Would the man never go? It struck seven. . . . It struck the half-hour. . . .

We dined at a quarter to eight. I drew my head in and shut the window, and dressed for dinner. Perhaps he had gone long ago, and with my head out of the window I had not heard the clash of the hall door.

Staples did pass a few moments later. I asked her if "the gentleman" had gone.

"Staying dinner, miss," said Staples shortly. Then, as she went on her way to dump down a jug full of hot water in Lady Violet's basin, she muttered over her shoulder: "As usual!"

The dinner-gong sounded. Dinner was a quarter of an hour late, or they had altered the hour. I put on my forbidden pearls—as an act of defiance, I suppose — and drifted downstairs like a visitor. James was adroitly supporting Lady Violet downstairs.

"Oh, Carrie!" said she, rather kindly than otherwise, a sure sign that things were going well with her, "I wondered if you had come. A little slower, please, Colonel Lisbon, I get less and less equal to hurry."

"There *is* no hurry," said my lover politely to the old woman, who panted—not he, although all

her not inconsiderable weight rested on him. His beautiful eyes were fixed on me for a moment. He had not, of course, his hand free to offer me. I fancied he was rather glad of that fact than otherwise. I followed them, turning the train of Lady Violet's velvet dress with my foot gently, to avoid treading on it. Poor thing, she had been quite well able to get downstairs without aid before I left her two months ago!

James carved.

I would not look at him, but I had time to closely observe the face of my patroness sitting at the foot of her own table, as if she would never move from it again. Her difficulty in getting about was apparently not the result of corpulence. The poor old thing had grown sadly, terrifically thin; her cheeks and her gown alike hung literally in bags. I automatically remembered her medicine, which stood usually on the sideboard, and which it had been my duty and privilege to give her. I rose, stiffly saying: "Your drops, Lady Violet!"

"Colonel Lisbon will pour them out for me. He has a steady hand."

There was no denying that. He poured them out for her with enviable precision. He also cut up her meat for her with a kind of knife they call a *masticateur*, I believe, and which, it appeared, he had procured for her from Paris. He peeled her an orange, he mixed her jorum of whisky and water. I sat like the stone I felt. I was totally unoccupied, and no one seemed to know

or care what I did. To think that I, who secretly grumbled at the hundred and one tasks that I had been used to perform for Lady Violet, should be so vexed when suddenly enabled to sit with my hands in my lap. But I hated seeing James—a man—doing them!

When the dinner—dietary in character, and unattractive to a man, one would have thought—was over, James helped Lady Violet upstairs again to the drawing-room, and tenderly established her in a *chaise longue* under the lamp, neatly pulling the shade of it into the position most pleasant to her. Then he set himself to make conversation.

It was not a great success. *I* tried my best. I was not hurt, or even offended—no one, after all, had done anything to offend or hurt me—I was simply paralysed, stupefied. I did not know what to do, and there was no need for me to do anything, there was the rub of it. I sat there, dropped into my chair, not sitting on it, an inert, shapeless piece of goods, as Lady Violet used to say.

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked. Time, in gold, moved his sickle. . . . James's profile seemed suddenly to have gone a long way off. . . . I fancy my head sank, weakly, uneasily, and James noticed it, as he always did notice things. I will give him that credit, he was a born nurse.

"Miss Courtenay seems tired after her journey," he remarked.

"Let her go to bed, then," answered Lady Violet. "We will excuse her."

There was nothing else to do but thank her for, and profit by, her permission. I rose, and my knees gave, as I stood for a moment to bid them both good night, and give James my hand. He was not *yet* an inmate of the house.

"Have a hot bottle or something!" he said in a loud voice, retaining my hot hand. "Have a dozen hot bottles. Nothing like them for a chill."

"She can order anything she likes," said Lady Violet. "She knows her way about here. Good night to you, Caroline. Sleep it off. Don't hurry down in the morning!"

How very, cruelly kind she was! I wished she would bully me as usual.

James had preceded me to the door and was holding it open for me. It was masked by a heavy screen which had been put there during my absence. Lady Violet could see neither of us. As I stood vacillating—through fatigue, not indecision—on the threshold, James stooped and kissed me. I suppose, if I had chosen, that I could easily have turned my head away and so evaded his embrace, but I was too slow. Indeed, I did not care to refuse the kiss that meant nothing to me now. I received it, and went on. He shut the door after me. Just before it closed I heard Lady Violet's affected cough and remark:

"Brr! When you have quite done kissing my companion behind the door——!"

I suppose he took pains to justify himself, but I knew her better than he did. As a matter of fact, she did not dream that there could be any truth in her ill-bred badinage; he had bamboozled her far too well. Probably it was he who had persuaded her to have the screen put in that very place for our future convenience. Strange to say, he wanted to kiss me now and then. The old woman had the money, but the girl had the pretty face; at least, he had once been good enough to tell me so. But I swore to myself that he should never kiss me again. Interviews gained at the cost of so much degradation were savourless — nay, odious. He had made a great mistake. And what did he get by it? Did she make him handsome presents? And if he sought to ingratiate himself with my patroness merely to facilitate our meetings, that could easily have been arranged without her intermission. I did not know how to interpret his conduct. Perhaps I was unjust? Perhaps I was not hard enough on such an arrant fortune-hunter. Was he that? I remembered the episode of his temporary devotion to Ralph Hardman, and replied mentally in the affirmative. And the worst of it was, that be the truth about his stay at Hardman Hall what it may, and his object with Lady Violet the same, he had succeeded in making himself indispensable to the old lady—a female companion would henceforth be quite useless. Like the maid of the old ladies of Cranford, she "liked the lads best."

I did tell James something of all this in the

course of an interview I had with him at a bun shop in the Strand one Saturday afternoon. It was not a *fête*, by any means. I think I shall loathe nobbly black currants sticking out of stale buns, and dishwater tea all my life, the more because of their connection with my squalid engagement. James had a brandy and soda.

He was suave and unsatisfactory. He had this peculiarity that he hardly ever answered a question or met an insinuation directly. He disconcerted me by his vague replies to rather carefully-framed interrogations, which, when once I had missed fire with them, I was ashamed of putting again, in so many words. On the other hand, he volunteered several illuminating remarks on the situation generally.

"The poor old woman!" he said, with his napkin tenderly brushing a crumb off my jacket. "I must say I do feel it rather low down to play her off like this for our benefit"—I stared—"but you know, Carrie, she can't possibly live more than a couple of years at most. Jenkins says so."

"Do you go and pump Jenkins?"

"No, Jenkins comes and confides his diagnosis to me. He may be a silly old sieve, but he is no fool; and he has the sense to see that I am the only person in the world who can get his prescriptions carried out. No offence to you, my dear, you have no more influence with her than a mouse —or Staples."

"I did have, before you came. But you have

taken everything out of my hands, for reasons best known to yourself." I glanced at him, but he did not wince. "And what *are* his silly prescriptions, since you have undertaken to administer them? One would be apt to imagine that you were giving her arsenic, you are so mysterious about it—only, unfortunately, you aren't her husband!"

"No, not yet!" said he, laughing, and his laugh was so frank and open that I was sorry I was being so disagreeable to him. "But as for old Jenks' remedies, they are very simple. It is that mysterious thing called 'nursing' that she wants. Some drugs, of course, but, for the most part, restricted diet and absolute rest and freedom from worry. You know what a restless old girl she is, and how she loves her dinner?"

"Well, but—is there positive disease?"

"Of course there is positive disease, you little goose! An aneurism—an abdominal aneurism."

I did not know exactly what that was, but I wished to be equal to the occasion in James's eyes, so I said, with some artificial apprehension—it is astonishing how stony I felt about poor Lady Violet's case!—"But that is a very painful illness, I believe?"

"You believe! I know it! I often admire her—she is a plucky old creature, and bravely minimises her sufferings so as not to worry me. She can even manage to raise a joke now and then when she is at her worst. She takes a tremendous and cultured interest in her own

symptoms, I may tell you—argues about them by the hour."

I was cross, there was not a doubt of it. "Not a very entertaining subject for a perfect stranger like you, one would have supposed," I observed coldly. "One can't help wondering why you do it."

"Oh, Carrie, really, now—why do I do it? I should have thought that an ordinarily womanly woman might have guessed if her thoughts were not perverted by temper. Ever since you came back, dear, you have seemed positively to hate me."

"I dislike your tortuous methods; indeed, I do. I had far rather personally see you every seven days at places like this and exist on the recollection of it for the rest of the week than watch you degrading yourself——"

"Hold on, Carrie! I can't have you speak like that to me. And how you can use that word in connection with a pure act of charity beats me to discover. I don't deserve particularly to go to Heaven I know, but I am a deuced deal less likely to be kicked out by good Peter at the gate, if a few acts of kindness to a poor lonely old woman can be placed to my account."

"But I can do all that is necessary—I am paid for it."

"Unfortunately, Carrie, you are of the sex that appeals to men, not to old invalid ladies. Don't you see, the whole point is that what she likes is

to be fussed over by a man—and a man whom she does not pay, either!"

"Doesn't she?" I was beside myself.

James tinkled the spoon against his cup, and, summoning the waiter, paid for the tea. He did not tip him, I noticed that. He sullenly allowed the man to help him on with his great-coat, and, without a word, I followed him out into the cold, emotion-blighting street. I was too angry to speak. My world had definitely crumbled with the first really unkind words between us. I wondered what he would do. He stood on the kerb-stone and held out his hand.

"I had better not see you home," he said, "for, if I do, I shall have to potter about in Dampier Square for a decent interval before I come in, and the wind is pretty sharp." He drew the fur collar of his coat about his ears. It was a new one, and it suddenly struck me that Lady Violet had given it to him. He was altogether too much for me.

"Oh, are you coming to dinner?" I said wearily, turning away.

"Certainly I am, if you have no objection?"

"The guests are no concern of the companion, are they?"

"Temper, temper!" said he. "I was going to say that if you will depart from your usual frigidity for once and contrive to let me out when I go, we might get a few words together—that is, if you care to."

"No, I do not care to, like that, in Lady Violet's house—clandestinely," I answered, almost crying, for he drove me so. "And all the while you are leading her to believe that she is your special friend, and that you go to see her only. It is just a horribly false position that you are wanting to place me in, and I simply can't feel natural. No, I feel odious, and thwarted, and bitter, and as if it was wrong even to speak to you——"

"As you like," he said sulkily at last. "I find it impossible to make love to a porcupine; any man would, I should imagine. You *have* a temper, Carrie. Perhaps you had rather I did not come at all to-night? I can make some lame excuse and disappoint her——"

"I don't care what you do."

He raised his hat stiffly, to mark his sense of our estrangement, I suppose, and went off in the direction of the city; while I, feeling perfectly stunned, boarded a West End 'bus at the peril of my life, because my usually agile legs refused their office. The pain of my grazed shin kept me amused all the way home.

He did not come that night, after all. Taking it all round, I felt and showed less piqued than Lady Violet. You see, I was broken-hearted! After dinner she dictated a note to him, accusing him of negligence, in the most approved forsaken-woman fashion. The sentiments I penned pretty nearly expressed my own. I wrote it as well as I could, allowing no tears to drop on the page

(Lady Violet's vexation did not "run" to tears, although it was acute enough), but it was rather difficult. I added no personal postscript, although it would have been quite easy to do so, as I was bidden to go and put the missive in the pillar-box myself. Lady Violet seemed averse to Staples taking cognisance of the frequency of her notes to Colonel Lisbon. Lady Violet was afraid of Staples in several particulars.

## CHAPTER XIX

NOW, Lady Violet's house is a prison to me, none the less irksome because she is a kind and careless jailer, and does not care to keep me locked up. Never in all the long years that I have been with her, have I had so much time to myself. As companion my position is ideal; she now calls me the "lady at large," and hints darkly that I am neglecting my duties; she is not aware—none of my friends are—that I have an able understudy, who does my work for love. For love! I am beginning to hate the word. There *is* no love in the world, it is all greed and self-seeking. The consolation of doing my work and minding my own business even is denied me. So long as I am to the fore in the morning—and not very early in the morning, either—I may lunch and go out to tea as much as I like. I might dine out every night, if I had any friends well enough off to invite me to such a majestic function. Jehane Bruce is, of course, always willing, nay, eager, to have me "lap in her trough," as she loves to put it; and I knew that Mrs Leadham, who was due back in town for

the winter, was sure to be effusively hospitable. But it did not look well, somehow, for me to have so much apparent leisure. I don't know why I should be so solicitous of appearances, and so anxious to preserve Lady Violet's reputation, but, as a matter of fact, I often dined or lunched in a cheap French place in Soho, and then joined the *queue* at the pit entrance of one of the theatres. I believe every horribly mirthless musical comedy in London thus defiled past my lack-lustre eyes. Several times I saw Perry and Desdemona sitting happily together in the stalls, and Mariuscha and Livingston. Mr and Mrs Langshire preferred Shakespeare. People seemed to be fixing it up all round me. Everybody had some one or other who took an interest in them. Even old women like Lady Violet, whom, miracle of miracles! happiness had made charitable, and almost pleasant.

Yes, she smiled on me when I went booted and jacketed into the drawing-room to take her orders. She would frown, when having divested myself of garments symbolical of outdoor pursuits I put in an appearance, ready to read to her or amuse her as usual. I made such official protests now and then, but with a faint heart. I was ordered to bid Staples keep up a good fire in my room, and my room was done up and made smart, and a writing table put in. One knew what that meant!

Of course, James read aloud far better than I did, and his conversation exactly suited her

anæmic brain, and amused without fatiguing her. But how it must have bored him! I could not discern any remunerative return on her part, unless he appreciated her occasional flashes of caustic insolence and unlovely shrewdness, and found her good company. I had thought her sallies amusing once, but at last they had become so much part of the warp and woof of her daily procedure with me, her "paid" companion, that I could not laugh and did not condescend to wince at them. The galled jade becomes impervious. They were new to James.

I suppose all this told on my looks, for Perry came to see me, and, brother-like, exclaimed at my appearance. I was all alone in the big drawing-room, as it happened, to receive him. Lady Violet had given up her At Homes. She was in the boudoir with James, who keeps his hat and stick in the hall now—Lady Violet has great faith in the efficacy of some article of male attire negligently hung up in a household composed of women, as a protection against burglars. James obliges her in this particular, as in all others.

"Poor old girl, you are a great deal too pale even for London!" Perry exclaimed. "What's the matter? Been going it, eh?"

"Now, how should I go it, Perry?"

"Oh, I don't know. Thought you might have tumbled to something good up at that place where you spent the summer."

"In the company of a dying man?"

"I forgot that. But before he died I used to hear of you from my friend Desdemona."

"Your friend Desdemona! But she——"

"Breathes fire and fury against me—yes, I know she does. Sweet idiot! She tells me she has even put me into a novel—novel with a very classy title—*The Man of no Moment.* Ha! ha! I can laugh at it, for I invented it myself!"

"She gave you an idea of the plot, then?" I asked drily.

"Bless her—yes, she did! Very ordinary plot, just like all women's plots. The title will sell the book, if it does sell. I keep on meeting her at Margot Bligh's, and what can one do but flirt with Desdemona? She demands it. I have no objection—I believe I love her still. There's a kind of gracious, graceful folly about Desdemona which appeals, and continues to appeal, to one. And she has no sense, of course, but as I have enough for two——"

"Then Jehane has left off appealing to you, I suppose?"

"Not exactly, but Jehane is a *leetle* hard. She isn't faithful, either. She would intrigue with a paper at once, quite regardless, if it made her an offer, and sacrifice me to an editor any day. No, Jehane is the Amazon of Fleet Street, and she will die an old maid. Now Desdemona—little feminine, shrinking thing——"

"Ah, but I suppose you have not had the privilege of reading the *strong* novel?"

"Not yet. Perhaps never, if I have any luck. I have no insane desire to know Desdemona's opinion of me. Besides, haven't you observed that scoldings always come to him who waits, and that curses return to roost—that is, if I do roost with Desdemona."

"Shall you, do you think?"

"Shouldn't be surprised. Who loves best bullies best, don't you know? and I shall probably go cheerfully half-way to meet my rod in pickle. You know my feeling for her is the kind of frail passion that wears well. She will last far better than a better stuff. She won't come out in the wash——"

"No; because she has been in it so often. Got mangled, and the dressing all taken out of her."

"Clever, Carrie—if a little bitter. But don't ride a metaphor to death. Drop it, and tell me if you are going to marry this Lisbon. Because, if you are, I'll tell him you want a course of Hematogen. He must look after his own."

"No, I am *not* going to marry him. Why should you imagine that?"

"I thought it looked like it—his coming so much to the house. Obviously, it can't be for the *beaux yeux* of the old woman, and you have sweet ones. Mournful, rather, though. Still, you needn't tell me it isn't you he is after."

"All I can say is he conceals his motive for coming pretty well, then."

"I am sure——"

"Don't be too sure. He is precisely the kind of

pussy-cat man who enjoys pottering about a sick-room."

Using this horrible impossible phrase in speaking of the man I cared for, I hope to allay my brother's suspicions. He, at any rate, changed the subject, enquiring anxiously what I was doing on Christmas Day.

"I suppose I shall be trying hard, as usual, to pretend it is nothing of the kind."

"Not you; you will be having a regular beano this year, with Lisbon to cheer you up. The old woman is sure to invite him."

"If he comes on Christmas Day, I shall certainly go out."

"Have you anywhere to go?"

"No."

"Then that settles it. You must come and dine at the sad, bad, mad Savoy with Desdemona and Jehane and me and Margot Bligh, and perhaps little Mrs Langshire. We are getting up a consolation-stakes dinner, and I am to be the only man."

"Good heavens, what a frost it will be!"

"Not at all, miss! I can pull that sort of thing through. The girls will eat and drink properly for once; both eyes on their plates instead of one on a man and the other on their own image in the glass opposite!"

"Good luck to you, then! If I can come I'll write, nearer the time. Go now, Perry! She *may* want me."

He received my essay in irony in all good faith. "Poor little slavey! Kept constantly at it, aren't you? I'll go. I say, be an angel and go and see Desdemona. She is at Margot Bligh's—as P.G., you bet. Margot never gives anything for nothing, but it suited Desdy's plans for the moment. I planted her there."

"Yours, then. Good-bye."

I used my odious unexpected spell of liberty in Perry's service, and went to the little house in Bayswater a day or two later.

"And how goes the great work?" I asked Desdemona, by way of saying the right thing. "You look tremendously excited about something. Don't you wish you were your own public?"

"Am I flushed?" asked Desdemona, looking coy. "That is not so much the novel—one is a woman, after all. But with regard to the novel, since you are so kind as to ask after its health, it's very well, and I am correcting the proofs now —at this very moment." She looked portentous. "I was correcting them yesterday—sitting in this very chair—when—when——"

"Get on, little trembler," interposed Margot brusquely. "Get it off your chest. She is trying to tell you, Carrie, with as little circumlocution as is possible to her nature, that your brother Perry came in and reproposed to her, and she had only just time to stick the cruel third chapter we have heard so much of, behind the cushion of the chair! What do you think of that?"

"He really did, Carrie," purred Desdemona, seeing that I looked incredulous. Proposals meant so much to other people, and so little to Perry. She went on with a confidence that a *bonâ fide* proposal alone could give, so I was forced to admit.

"And as we are now to be sisters-in-law, and Margot here to be my bridesmaid, I see no reason why we should not talk of it all quite openly. So now let me tell you both—it was simply dreadful. Every time I leaned forward, the papers I had got with the proof—the MS., you know—crackled disgracefully, and it made me so shockingly nervous that I am afraid I accepted him most *gauchely*."

"I daresay Perry has been accepted more gracefully in his time," said I; "but the great thing was, you were what he wanted most at that moment, and he got you."

Margot took up the wondrous tale. "She dared not move, do you see? for fear that the incriminating documents should slip out, and so when Perry put his arms round her she just could not be maidenly and struggle, even if she had wanted to. Most embarrassing, wasn't it?"

"Perry is very managing," said I.

"I don't know what you mean by managing," retorted Desdemona, "considering he isn't supposed to know anything about it. I consider he was quite straightforward, and made his *amende* beautifully; I'll tell you what he said. That he had lately

come to realise that women are capable of really serious work, and that during our estrangement my horizon had probably enlarged greatly, and that I had acquired wider and perhaps more workable views. He was sure that, at any rate, they were more suitable to the state——"

"To which he was going to call you. It sounds a most truly adequate apology."

"Yes," said Margot. "And he promised never to make fun of her dear little writings again, and that she might perpetrate a dozen novels a year for all he cared, so long as she didn't insist on his reading them."

"Oh, Margot, you old story!" exclaimed the other; "he said, on the contrary, that he was going to begin to read my new story straight away—and I simply blenched!"

"She turned pea-green," declared Margot, "and implored him by all her gods not to do it. And he answered — with obvious relief — that if she preferred it, he wouldn't take any more interest in her business than she would in his, when he was lucky enough to get one, and that wasn't much, he was sure. So now it is all settled."

"Except the business. I expect Desdemona will have to keep Perry when all is said and done."

"With this hand and pen. Yes, I will. Won't you kiss me, Carrie?"

I obeyed the call of social duty, and then Desdemona sighed and, sitting down, murmured:

"How, now, Carrie, to reconcile Love with Literature?"

"You can burn *The Man of no Moment*, I suppose?"

"What, strangle the child of my brain! Out of the question! No, Carrie; a work once set up is practically born into this troublesome world of reviewers, inevitable — ineluctable — irretrievable! Only—somehow, it does seem a bit spiteful, now, my portrait of Perry."

"Oh, I'll forgive you; and if his sister can forgive you, surely——"

"You haven't read it," wailed Desdemona. "It is practically scarifying an angel — breaking a butterfly upon the wheel. I hit very straight. I don't mince my condemnation. And so, for fear of a possible descent of Perry, I have to correct my proofs in my own bedroom now. Margot gave him a latch-key and he comes bouncing in—— Here he is."

We heard Perry's cheerful voice in the entry, welcoming Margot's mother, who had toddled into the passage to welcome him.

"I do wish mother wouldn't!" grumbled Margot; "it does let a house down so. But she is devoted to your brother, and wishes God had made a pair of him for me. But I mean to marry money—or position!"

Then began a hulla-baloo; Perry and Margot seemed like good-humoured terrier dogs, shaking and hustling the frail Desdemona. But she liked

it. Perry again alluded to the Christmas dinner, but I said there wasn't the slightest chance of my attending it, and, bidding them all adieu, made my way out into the dreary street.

It was too early to go in. I walked round and round Dampier Square, eyeing the comfortable, warm house I lived in, and the lighted window behind whose curtains I surmised that James was sitting reading aloud to Lady Violet, out of her countess's Memoirs or some kindred work. I felt like a bird that had been kicked out of its nest, a sheep strayed from the fold, while my appointed shepherd piped to an alien and recked not of me.

But, for a wonder, James was not behind those blinds; he was not dining with us that night. After the ugly repast was over, Lady Violet drew me aside.

"Have you anywhere to dine on Christmas Day?" she asked.

I stared frankly. She and I had eaten our Christmas turkey together for ten years.

"I suppose you will open your eyes still wider at the piece of intelligence I am going to give you. But you must know it sooner or later. I am going to be married to Colonel James Lisbon on the 17th of December, and we shall naturally be away for the honeymoon over Christmas!"

Faugh!

## CHAPTER XX

PERRY'S dinner-party was very gay. His wedding was fixed for March. In the cloak-room of the gorgeous restaurant where we fed, my future sister-in-law laid feverish hold on me and confided to me her anguish because her wedding and the publication of her book were arranged for the same day.

"Such an awful sort of double event, isn't it, Carrie? I have implored Perry to defer the marriage till I am tired of begging. The book, do you see? can't possibly come out till the month of March—even that is too soon for the publishing season—and yet I did so want it to be a *fait accompli* before the wedding! Can't you use your influence for me with Perry? He is so masterful, dear thing!"

"I should have thought you could have managed him best."

"But I have worried him already so much about what he considers a mere whim, that I can't say any more under penalty of getting myself disliked. At last I had to tell him plainly that it was *my*

novel that was concerned, and that I was afraid when he had read it that he would not want to marry the author of such a book. But he only said, 'Why, was it so very improper? and that, if that was so, then the sooner he made an honest woman of me the better!' I said, 'No, it wasn't in the least improper'; and then he asked if it was dull, for that he simply could not forgive."

"And what did you say to that?"

"That I did not think for a moment it was dull—how could it be, so vital, so strong!—but that sooner than explain the why and the wherefore, I should infinitely prefer to break off the engagement."

"Oh, I say!" said I, and there being no more to say we went out into the vestibule, where a slim, black, good-tempered Perry rose from the long seat to welcome us. We were the first of his guests to arrive. He knew well enough what we had been talking about.

"I say, Carrie," he said, "is this beastly novel of Desdy's going to sow dissension between us? She *must* publish it, I suppose?"

"Why, yes, Perry, of course I must publish it. What are you thinking of?" said the sombre but determined authoress.

"I am thinking of our poor little future, which, from all I hear, seems to be seriously jeopardised. Well, well, murder and fiction must out, I suppose. It will do Desdy good to get it off her chest, anyway. Fiction is only a form of suppressed gout that

women have. However, I have a plan to prevent all the mischief. Whatever comes from Desdemona's pen, past, present, and future, I solemnly vow here, before you, Carrie, as witness, that I won't read it!"

Desdemona's face fell, and she murmured discontentedly:

"You are most generous, dear. But then if it is a great success people will tell you the plot, and all about the tendency of the book—and I can't promise that it *won't* be a great success."

"God forbid that any work of yours should fall still-born from the press! But I can look after myself. Catch people telling me anything that I don't want to hear! And perhaps you are a little bit inclined to be pessimistic, dear?" His eyes twinkled.

"What do you mean?" she said, more sharply than was her wont.

"It might—I don't like to be too sanguine, neither—it might be a failure after all."

We went in. The feature and *pièce de résistance* of the evening was the Langshire couple. Herbert Langshire was himself, only more so, and he had recreated Michelle in his own image. That is the trick such men always do play on their wives. Michelle's neatly-dressed hair, her well-cut, not too striking, gown, her thoroughly un-Carltonish air, suggested the sweet domestic matron of Hans Place out on her sainted task of chaperonage, bent not so much on ornament as on her work of

pure ablution round the desperately human shores of fashionable restaurants.

"You have been with my sister?" she said to me timidly, for Herbert Langshire appeared to be listening. "I wish you would tell me about her. You know Herbert disapproves? I can't help it. He won't go there. He doesn't care about the kind of people she has got round her. That awful Mrs Coles—don't you remember?"

I mentioned Casimir Livingston.

"Oh, alas! he left long ago. We both so wished that Mariuscha's marriage with him could have been arranged. He has plenty of money, don't you know? and was most anxious to marry her. Such a nice, thoroughly suitable person. But Mariuscha seems to get on best with Bohemians, and Herbert detests them. He has never been brought up to that sort of thing, and he won't stay in Mariuscha's house or let me, and Mariuscha never writes. She whisks in to see me sometimes at Hans Place, but then all she says is so flighty—so *décousu*—Mariuscha never used to be flighty. She has lost all her nice dignity that used to keep the Bohemians at a safe distance, at any rate. I wish you would go down and stay with her."

"I can't get away very well."

"Yes, I know Lady Violet—Lisbon, isn't she, now? She married a man Mariuscha used to know, didn't she? A Bohemian, too?"

"Oh no," said I emphatically.

"Herbert said he was a rotter, or something like that."

"Only because he has done what Casimir Livingston won't do—he has married money!"

"I expect he pays dear for his whistle," said Michelle sagely. "She must be very trying. One has only to look at you, dear Miss Courtenay, to see what a tiresome person she is to live with. Why, you look quite worn. *Must* you stay with her?"

"What else can I do?"

"Come to me," said Michelle kindly. "I have a nice baby for you to look after, as much as his nurse and father will let you. They look after his body, but I like his mind trained too, and fairy tales told him; and I am sure you must be very nice with children, aren't you?"

"I have never tried."

"Well, give up your old lady and come and see. I assure you I am very easy to get on with, and I have such a sympathy for you. Poor, dear mother was so fond of you, Carrie—may I call you Carrie?"

"Yes, if you want me to cry out loud here in the restaurant."

"My dear child, you *are* in a bad way, if a word of kindness upsets you like this!" Michelle said, genuinely alarmed. "You want looking after. You must be going through some sort of strain?"

"I guess I am," I said, taking refuge in an

Americanism to conventionalise my mood. "I shall be all right. I'll drink some champagne."

Before we left the table she had made me promise that in case of any unforeseen event cutting short my stay under Lady Violet's roof I would communicate with her, and my day ended under the wing of Herbert Langshire, to whom his kind little wife had signalled a command that he was to play balm in Gilead to me as far as possible during the remainder of the evening. They drove me home, and deposited me with every politeness on Lady Violet's doorstep. The carriage drove away when, and not until, the door had answered to the key.

The worst of talking over a wounded heart and dwelling on its symptoms is that it encourages them, and I pitied myself exceedingly as I stood alone on the hall mat inside. I was even so absurdly melodramatic as to shake my fist weakly at James's cap hanging on the topmost horn of the antlered-deer-thing in the hall. Then, like an idiot, I wanted to kiss it, so as to expiate my unkindness, but dared not give way to sentiment even before myself. No one was there to laugh at me. There was not a soul in the house but the cook, and she was sound asleep, and Lady Violet and her husband were away on their honeymoon.

At St Leonards. A week later they were due to come back. Staples had resumed her duties. The house was swept and garnished. The dressing-

room where I used to sleep was arranged for James. The bed was very small and uncomfortable, but he could easily hear from it, as I did, Lady Violet's lightest murmur and her heavy ones, too! I did not suppose he could see to shave in the looking-glass; I know I could never see to do my hair properly by its aid.

Staples was intending to give notice and leave. Her sense of *bienséance* was outraged by Lady Violet's inappropriate marriage. So was mine, but I did not know whether I could manage to tear myself away from the scene of it.

I waited for them in the dining-room, staring expectantly out of the window, from habit, I suppose. At last there drove up, not the ordinary four-wheeled cab that I expected, but an ambulance!

It was the stalwart bridegroom's task to lift his bride out and over her own threshold. Her head and its senile adornments dangled over his shoulder. But she adored him. I saw her bleared eyes turn to him, as he jolted her the least little bit over the inner doorstep, and I felt quite sick. From my place, squeezed up against the pilaster of the inner hall in an attitude of some sort of welcome, I looked at his face, intent, absorbed as it was in his task. It was lined, his eyes were hollow. He never looked at me. It was wiser not. The cowering disgust in our two glances would have smouldered and burst into a flame.

"What is it?" I said, in a single second's breath-

ing time, when Lady Violet had been laid on the couch in the morning room preparatory to the greater effort of getting upstairs. I did not point to the object of my question—he knew.

"Paralysis!" he replied, without looking at the woman who questioned him.

## CHAPTER XXI

I WAS housekeeper now. The keys were given up to me. The new servants engaged by James were at my orders, and I could see that it was as much as their place was worth to be cheeky to me. James saw to that I was dissociated from all my former duties; I had no share in the complicated nursing of Lady Violet. But I did odd jobs for him. I was his hench-woman. His orders were as often as not delivered to me through the open door of Lady Violet's bedroom. She had taken a violent dislike to me, as I realised the first time she was sufficiently recovered from the fatigue of her journey to take some of her meals with James and me in the dining-room. She sat in a cleverly improvised reclining chair stuffed with garish cushions, at the side of the table, and refused to take any dish or mess of any sort from my hand—indeed, from any hand but that of James, whose habit of quiet movement and deliberation of speech and manner made him an invaluable nurse. He never fussed, yet he was assiduous.

To me he was courteous and gentle, as to a

trusted associate in some great work. The style, the perfection of his manner should have disarmed me, if anything could have done so. When he raised his eyes to me, which was not often—James carefully husbanded his resources in the way of appeal—they expressed everything, and a great deal more than I was willing to understand. That was it. I could not receive their message. I closed my intelligence to what I was pleased to consider my lover's humiliation. My one idea was to rub it "in" to him. He had married this old lady—very well, therefore he must pretend to love her! I strove at every turn to show him that this childish interpretation was the one, and the only one, I put on his action. I felt as if I could only salve my own wound by placing him in a ridiculous light.

During these six months I employed treasures of strategy; I instituted the most complicated manœuvres in order to avoid being left alone for a single moment in his company. I believe it "took my mind off," as the old women say. It was not easy. I lived a great deal in my own room, a large room over the floor where Lady Violet's apartment and James's dressing-room that adjoined it, were situated. He slept there when he really went to bed, but on a great many nights I am convinced he lay down in his clothes merely on the sofa in his wife's room. That was when she had an attack. But even on the off-nights, it is my belief that he never got what is

called a good night's rest. I used to hear sounds as I lay awake, sounds as of doors opening and shutting, of water being poured out. . . . She would not have a nurse, and it was his duty to carry out the doctor's instructions, to affix, I know not what horrible plasters, to perform I would not allow myself to guess what loathsome ministrations. Poor James—the dandy, the exquisite! He had sold himself into one of the lowest forms of slavery.

There was one thing I could not help noticing: his nights of broken rest did him no obvious harm. The beauty of this caitiff, as I was pleased to call him in my thoughts, seemed to increase daily. His grey and plentiful hair, that had been admirable before, was none the less becoming in that it grew white and crowned a head that might have served a painter for the model of a monk of old, one of those handsome, slightly Jesuitical types of churchman that artists have always loved to work from and use as types of religious asceticism. Sometimes his smile, weary, thin-lipped, long-suffering, made me, hard as I am, want to go away and cry by myself, or else fling myself at his feet and crave his pardon for having doubted him.

For I love an honest fulfiller of vows. And surely whatever advantage accrued to him through his alliance with Lady Violet, he certainly kept his side of the bargain, and gave her full measure, pressed down and full to overflowing. His capable nursing, old Jenkins said, undoubtedly kept Lady

Violet alive, and as a result of his husbandry care, it was quite on the cards that she might live for years!

I really did not know what to think.

Perhaps this life that he led fulfilled every need of his cold, fishy nature. It must be a cold nature, in spite of his eyes. And as a companion Lady Violet was very much improved, and did not say half as many disagreeable things as she used to do. Her gratitude and devotion towards him were pathetic and painful to see. Her bleared, watery eyes, awkward of perception, fixed on him, made me feel sick—with jealousy? Surely not? No, it must have been the grotesqueness, the unseemliness of it all that shocked me so. She was most equable over accounts, and generous about her money, and gave him presently, as I learned, the whole direction of her finances. She even made the bulk of it over to him, I believe, to avoid his paying any legacy duty. She permitted, nay, enjoined, that he should spend the interest of it freely. He went to a good tailor—an awfully good tailor, so it seemed to me, but perhaps it was the effect of his remarkably well-proportioned figure—and he smoked the finest cigars, and plenty of them. He might have brought anybody he liked to the house and entertained them royally, but he did not seem to care to bring friends in. I was not surprised at that: why invite witnesses of a state of things that did him no honour and justified all the unkind things people like Margot

Bligh had said of him? He belonged to two expensive clubs, however, and went to one or the other of them for an hour or so every day; at least, I gathered that he did so. He did not neglect his bodily health, either, but played golf on Saturdays at Wimbledon and swam every day at six.

I think Margot Bligh would have given him away if this had been otherwise. She was the only person from the outer world that I saw occasionally, and she was the person I liked least. That is generally the way. I was too bitter to enjoy the society of any one whom I did not despise, and that is the truth of it! Margot was like the acid cordial that screws up your mouth with distaste, and which you tolerate when sweetness would disgust you. She kept me up more or less in the outside doings of the third inmate of our prison house in Dampier Square, and the scandal of which Margot was unaware did not exist!

I did not go out very much. A forced member of this dreadful triumvirate, I grew to coherence with it; it fascinated me, my whole life was there. Nothing outside of it interested me—it came to that; and I think I should have gone mad if I had not pulled myself together one day and sought James for the first time, in his smart smoking-room that Lady Violet had had arranged for him.

He turned round in his swivel chair, with the smile of an archangel on his face.

"So, Carrie, you have come at last?" he said.

"I have come to give notice."

"You dear, funny little thing!"

"You must not speak like that."

"Big thing, then. Certainly you have got a tremendous lot of dignity lately. You are twice the woman you were!"

It was a sign of my terribly over-wrought condition that I did not resent this free way of speaking; it seemed to me so utterly by the way, just a sign of how irremediably James and I had drifted on to different planes.

"Will you convey my decision to Lady Violet Lisbon?" I said clearly; and he frowned, then.

"It should be *you* that bears my name," he said. "Oh, Carrie, you have no idea how you hurt me!"

"Do I? I am sorry."

"How like you, dear—not to launch out into recrimination and tell me how I have hurt you and that sort of maudlin, sloppy reproach. . . . Stop, Carrie, you are not going——"

"You were talking quite beside the subject, I thought."

"I was drivelling, in fact," said he, flushing. "Well, you are not very nice to me, but I suppose I deserve it. And now I suppose you want a cheque?"

"In due course," I answered.

"I'll write it now."

"Very well. Up to date, then, if you please; understand I wish to go to-morrow."

"No; you can't do it like that. You must have your month's wages, whether you go to-morrow or at the end of the month; I insist on it."

"That keeps me here, against my will."

"I intended it so."

"Because I cannot accept money I have not worked for, or favours from you and your wife," I said gently.

"Settle it as you please," he said, revolving on the swivel chair with an air of finality. James had a temper.

I stayed the month out. What else could I do? And I had literally nowhere to go to. I had spoken without book, I had leaped without looking, in my pain. For it *was* pain, that is all I will say. I wrote to Michelle Langshire, hardly expecting her to adhere to her kind offer of some few months ago.

She did, though. She wired back to me—a sweet, effusive, expensive telegram, bidding me come to her at once.

But I waited my month. I don't believe poor Lady Violet even realised that I was going. She said good-bye to me as if I were going for a walk. She was further gone than I thought. James would soon come into his own.

This was in the afternoon of the day preceding my departure. I retired early. James put his wife to bed as usual. About eleven o'clock, when he was "through" with her, he came to the door of my room and knocked.

I rose and opened it; I had not expected to see him, but a maid, but I stood to it, and did not run away.

"Carrie," he said, "bar chaff and listen to me. I have never, so far, taken the right way with you, I see that now. I don't think you understand that when a man is in a hole, when any explanation one cares to give is inadequate and a full one indecent and unfair to other people, a man fights shy of both and takes refuge in—phrases! You ought to have seen without being told. But you didn't. We have been at cross purposes for more than a year. It has been hell. The result of your—stupidity, let us call it! But now, if you will give me leave—if you will put something on and come quietly down into the drawing-room, and speak to me, I believe I can put things before you quite clearly, and Carrie, darling, I feel convinced that when I have done you will agree with me, that I have all through steered our ship well — taken the only course possible."

I pulled my nightgown close round me and said—what I could not help saying:

"I might agree with you — yes, if I heard your story, but—I will never allow you to tell it me!"

## CHAPTER XXII

THE first day I had free at Mrs Langshire's I spent in going to see my new sister-in-law in her new house at St John's Wood.

"Oh, Carrie, you were always such an angel to me; I can't bear to think of you a mere nursery governess. Come here and I'll manage to fake up a room for you till you have made it up with Lady Violet. It would really look better——"

"And feel better," I admitted. I didn't mind her explicit statement of the grounds of her charity; I knew I hadn't been such an angel to her in the past, so things were even. "But I like the baby——"

"Well, stay by all means if it fulfils every need of your soul, but I wish for my own sake, Carrie, you had been here with me at first. A third person would have helped the awkwardness and tided me over a pretty awkward time."

"The strong novel again!" I ejaculated.

"Yes, the stupendous novel; and, Carrie, it isn't the stupendous novel's fault if I didn't lose my husband's love at the very outset of our married life." She lay back in her chair and covered her

face with her hands. "Only think, dear—we met it on a bookstall on our very way back from Harrogate!"

"Met what?"

"*The Man of no Moment.*"

"What odds, so long as you had the Man of Moment along with you?"

"Oh, you are flippant in great moments, just like Perry," she wailed. "Listen. It was all brand-new and piping hot, with my name as large as life in white paint on the red cover. Of course, it's red—they always seem to bind strong books in red. I simply shook, and a sympathetic guard at once rushed to get me a foot-warmer. Perry sighted the book at once—it was given a rather prominent place on the stall—and wanted to buy me a copy—two copies! I luckily succeeded in putting him off that idea, but it was merely staving off destiny, after all. There were half a dozen, with the publisher's compliments, waiting for me at home!"

"What did you do, you poor thing?"

"Nothing, till after dinner. Then at the psychological moment when we were sitting in the dear little new drawing-room with coffee and cigars, I opened the parcel at last. It made a horrid, portentous crackling, and Perry scolded me!"

"What, already?"

"Poor boy! he was to the full as nervous as I was, don't you see? I took out a copy, and cut it slowly, and then offered to read it aloud to him; that would be my expiation, I thought!"

"Yes, but what had *he* done?"

"He was thoughtful and considerate, and suggested that I must be too tired and sleepy, and he gave me a hundred other *échappatoires*; but I said, 'Perico—I call him Perico in certain moods—Perico, I must have this thing off my mind, it is unhinging your poor Desdy's brain. If you come to hate and detest your wife after she has made a clean breast of it, well, it can't be helped. I shall, at any rate, have been honest, and you have always said you valued my limpid sincerity, Perico mine!'"

"Perry *hates* inartistic, truthful women, didn't you know? Well, what line did he take?"

"He grunted like a husband, every inch of him, and said it was to be as I wished, and he would kiss me well over first, in case he didn't feel like it afterwards. Isn't that just like Perry? So I put him into the best new armchair—Jehane's present—and placed my own face as much in the shadow as I could, and then poked up the fire for him. The poor innocent wanted to know if I could possibly see to read, there in the dark. As if I didn't know it all by heart! Every word of it is burnt into my soul in letters of fire! I wondered now how I ever could have been such a beast as to do it! I opened the book at the first chapter, feeling turned to stone, and just before I began I said to Perry, 'Good-bye, darling!'—sacramentally, don't you know?"

"Perry giggled, I bet?"

"Not at all. He murmured, quite sweetly, 'Good night, you mean!' and settled himself down in the chair and told me to 'Fire away!' So I began, gabbling it all rather at first, so as to somewhat obscure the terrible main issue; but there, you know, Carrie, one is an artist after all——"

"To the finger-tips—yes. Well?"

"I began insensibly to make points, to read with effect, to bring out the values, don't you know? it was impossible to me not to do so—and so I went on, for the best part of an hour, reading for all I was worth and enjoying it, but never once daring to look at Perry. If only I had, I should have avoided being made to look a *leetle* ridiculous. But on I went. . . . Oh, if only I were a comic artist, which, thank God, I'm not, what a telling scene it would have made! I heard a funny little sound at last—one I have heard before; most of us have, I fancy," added poor Desdemona ruefully. "That enlightened me. I did venture to timidly raise my head, and look at my dear husband——"

She covered her face with her hands and actually laughed. Desdemona is less of a goose than I thought. Marriage *does* de-sentimentalise!

"The Man of the Moment was fast asleep, I apprehend?"

She nodded. "Even so. Not very flattering, was it? But I fancy some of my nervous excitement had communicated itself to him, through his intense power of sympathy with me, and produced

nervous exhaustion, and so forth. That is how I account for it. And I have one consolation: now he will never realise his misguided wife's crime, committed in a moment of aberration, it is true. He had left me, it might almost be counted a *crime passionel*."

"A French jury would certainly so have esteemed it. How is it going, anyway?"

"Reading very well, Mudie's man tells me. And dear old Jehane has managed to get it for review on her new organ."

"Hullo! Is Jehane married, too?"

"Oh, that old joke!" Desdemona laughed. She is decidedly growing a sense of humour. "Not conventionally — no orange blossoms; but all I know is that she talks as if she was bound hand and foot to that new Liberal paper—what's its name? She says the editor—I forget who he is —has insisted on her throwing over the old *Lightning Conductor* for him, that paper she used to swear by!"

"I hope, at least, he has given her an engagement ring."

"An agreement, you mean? Oh yes; Jehane is a splendid woman of business, and leaves no loopholes for possible breach of literary promise. She will never marry, in the ordinary way, that girl! And, Carrie, listen—I have found out something about her, the truth about a fact that used to upset me a good deal. She says she never was really engaged to Perry."

"Jehane is a lady."

"Oh, you mean she *was* engaged to my husband?"

"I mean she is a lady, and ladies always throw dust in people's eyes about the men that liked them."

"According to you, then, to be a lady is to be a liar," said Desdemona sharply. She was still a little jealous of Jehane. My brother's wife was a sweet woman—that is to say, a woman without a fibre of manly generosity. But even so she made him a far better wife than the other, and Perry knew it; he had exercised his judgment, as most men do, on the most important problem of a life partner. Jehane was not of the stuff of which workaday wives are made.

Perry came in on this aimless discussion, kissed me, and told me something that set my whole soul on fire, in that careless way of his.

"We saw Langshire's spirited sister-in-law at the play last night," he said. "Didn't Desdy tell you? Looking fine. With a man—your old woman's dastard husband."

"Don't, Perry; Carrie has got quite a soft place in her heart for him, I do believe," said Desdemona. "He certainly is diabolically good-looking."

"He was always *quite* nice to me," said I sturdily. "And I am sure I must often have been dreadfully in the way."

"Come, Carrie, you are not going to make out that he wanted to spoon the old woman," said Perry coarsely—one's relations *are* coarse. "That

was a marriage of interest, pure and simple. I expect he was only too glad to see something young and pretty about the house."

"Carrie means," said Desdemona with perspicuity, "that he behaved nicely to her, not trying to kiss her behind doors, and that sort of thing. Still, I can quite understand her wanting to leave, for, as I said before, the man is most awfully good-looking, and Carrie is nothing if not proper——"

I couldn't stand any more of this sort of talk. I got up and went. I quite expected to see Mariuscha at Hans Place some time that evening; she would probably dine there and go back to her club to sleep. She generally combined a theatre with a visit to her sister.

She was there. And I did not, somehow, feel fond of her; I did not like her hat. I always think deterioration in style shows first of all in a woman's choice of hats. Still, I gave her no cause to suppose I was "down" on her, and she repeatedly begged me to come down to her at Hardman for an unlimited visit.

"Do lend me Carrie, Mich'. I want her."

"Carrie can go if she likes," said Michelle, secretly delighted.

But I demurred. I was out of love with Mariuscha, and I adored Michelle's child. "You have got dear Mrs Coles," I said.

"Oh, I don't want you as a chaperon," said Mariuscha quickly; "I've put an end to all that sort of nonsense. I have enough money to do

without a chaperon. But I like Carrie and her strong style of moral support; and there's a man coming she knows, and she could help me to deal with him." She laughed, not very pleasantly.

"Oh, Mush' dear, who is it? Who have you got now? Herbert says you do pick up such odd people."

"This is a steady, staid, sensible man," announced Mariuscha, enjoying it. "He has got enough to sober him! A wife about a hundred years old. He has made great sacrifices for money—just as I have——"

"Colonel Lisbon," said I quickly.

"Just so. How quick you are, Carrie! Though I suppose his case *is* rather exceptional. I have never seen Lady Violet Lisbon, but, judging from all accounts, she must be a terror."

"Does he abuse his wife to you?" I asked.

"No gentleman would; eh, Carrie? Is he a gentleman? You ought to know; you were in the house with him for a long time—as long as you could stand it, apparently. He said you were a dear, little demure thing—he quite remembered you."

"But, Mush'," at last Michelle interposed—she had been trying for a long time to get a word in—"but, Mush', it really isn't quite nice if he is—he appears to be a married man——?"

"Not very much married," said Mariuscha. "He has all his evenings out."

How common she had grown! I hated her

manner. So did poor Michelle, who feebly continued to protest:

"Darling Mush', *must* you go about with him? It looks so bad. I shall have to tell Herbert, and Herbert will so dislike it—I——"

"I can't help it. He amuses me," said Mariuscha. She was trying to tease. "Very few men do now. He's like me in a great many respects. He's reckless, like me; his life's spoilt, like mine! He's quite a pal! We went to the theatre together last night——"

"Oh, but, Mush', it's bad enough to go about with him in London, but I'm sure Herbert wouldn't even dislike that so much as your asking a man like that to stay with you in your country house alone—except with Mrs Coles, and Herbert has always disapproved of *her*!"

"Well, then, why doesn't Herbert let my own sister come and stay with me? It is his own fault that I am thrown back on Mrs Coles and her like, who are glad enough to come whenever they are asked, and don't fuss me. Mrs Coles is used to deal with brainey men, casual women, and odd-come-shorts of every sort. She is a big woman, and can chuck them out if necessary——"

"I'll come to you, Mariuscha," said I suddenly; "if Mich' will give me leave."

## CHAPTER XXIII

HARDMAN HALL, in the early April sunlight, looked just as usual, ancient and feudal and dignified. The little, shy, reserved orchard on the east, with its carpet of daffodils, was quite ready for Mélisande and her knight to walk in, but from the other side of the house, Yahoo-like shrieks proceeded, and suggested Margate sands rather than a mediæval garden of peace. I had not walked, for, although Mariuscha had not come to meet me herself—she never walked—she had sent a conveyance; she kept horses and motors now to convey her numerous house-parties to and fro. The eldritch noises I heard issued presumably from the mouths of the house-party—the sort of people who were only too glad to batten upon the hospitality of this socially ostracised young woman. They came from town. The country was stone to her. The frowning towers of Lord Lathbury's place could be seen in the distance; Sir George Gunter brought up a large family of irreproachable sons and daughters within a stone's throw of Miss Mary Hardman's domain. That was her name now. But they

would not have known what to say to the guests gathered round her by the despised one, the men that shouted and the women that squeaked, the people with pasts and no futures.

I came across Mariuscha herself in the walled garden lying in a hammock—it was prematurely warm and fine weather for April. Mrs Coles lay in another, and raised an ill-dressed head at my approach.

"How do you do, dear? Tell me, am I showing my frillies too much? The men will be here in a minute."

"Not enough," I said politely; "they are so superb."

Cheap thread lace resting on black button boots—an effect I detest! Another wild shriek was heard! Mariuscha did not raise her head. Mrs Coles bobbed up.

"That's George Grant, I know!"

"What are they all doing?" I asked.

"Trying to catch the old pike that lives in the moat," said Mariuscha. "It eats everything else, and is a horrid nuisance. When they miss him they shriek. They have missed him every time as yet."

I looked through a narrow slit in the wall, and observed the fishermen. There they were—men, very young men, in dulled flannels and faded blazers, all except Colonel Lisbon, and he was dressed a little older than the others, but very fresh and smart—Lady Violet's bounty! He

was lying on his stomach in the green sward of the bank, ardently preparing a snare for the pike, the liveliest, the gayest of the gay. A young malapert boy, whom I supposed to be George Grant, the dispossessed, was abetting him. I did not see Casimir Livingston; he was probably not there. I couldn't imagine him having a word to say to any one of them.

Mrs Coles entertained me. I suppose that was what she was there for. Mariuscha never pretended to entertain any one.

"This is a charming place, isn't it?" she piped. There was no contradicting her. "I can't tear myself away from it. Dear Mariuscha has been very kind; she has allowed me to send for my belongings. Big Babsie and Wee Oneie both say they mean to stay here for ever. Blear-eyed, broken-down *roués* of London—no wonder that they love it! . . . Oh, Miss Courtenay, fancy! I have heard the nightingale for the first time—last night. We make up select parties of two to the coppice, taking a bottle of champagne with us for a third. Big Babsie and I, Mariuscha and Colonel Lisbon, Margot Bligh and her R.A.——"

"Has Margot got a real live R.A. in tow?"

"Yes; and the affair's coming on very nicely under everybody's kind fostering. He's not a very young one; he'll be retiring soon, but, anyhow, he can look after her 'pics.' well, and she says she feels she could marry a literal Methusalem in the cause of Art. Dear, happy-natured girl! she is

painting Wee Oneie now—she is most happy with children's portraits. Why don't you take your hat off, Miss Courtenay, dear?"

I misunderstood her. "Oh, dear, must I go in? It is so nice out here."

"Oh, here we never wear hats out of doors, only for afternoon tea in the house, you know; that's the latest."

"When the county comes to call, eh?" I said spitefully. I liked to get rises out of The Coles, and Mariuscha wasn't listening.

"It doesn't, my dear; we are boycotted, but we don't mind. We just bring our social stuff down from town as we import our caviare and *paté*, don't you know? And, as a matter of fact, there's nothing so dull as county society."

"Especially when you can't get it for love or money," put in Mariuscha suddenly. "Carrie, is Michelle coming to me or not?"

I tried to doctor Michelle's expressed attitude with regard to her sister's house-parties into a semblance of polite negation. I was dying to fight Mrs Coles, so I murmured something about Michelle's "flood of engagements—a constant rush——"

"Where there's a will, there's always a back-water on the stream of London life," said that odious creature. "I cannot stand people giving themselves airs of being indispensable to the London season like that."

"*We* are not indispensable, it seems, at any

rate," said Mariuscha, languidly throwing her long legs out of the hammock. She was imitated in this gesture, clumsily, by Mrs Coles.

"Here comes the pikesters!" the latter exclaimed, "and Big Babsie! Doesn't he look triumphant? Miss Courtenay, let me introduce you to my husband."

I had thought Big Babsie was her baby, but it was no matter. Colonel Lisbon strode up, negligently, and shook hands with me, and I asked after his wife. What else could I do? And the mere juxtaposition of Mrs Coles spurred me to conventionality. Her eye was on me, and on Mariuscha's new "boy." Not so that of Mariuscha; she scorned, and always had scorned, to watch her own property. Then Margot Bligh and her R.A. issued forth from the coppice; they appeared to have been listening to nightingales in the daytime. He was senile, but looked quite good—the only unsophisticated person here. The boy that pinched me came last, hot and filthy with green slime; he had been "in," or nearly so.

If this was the rightful heir, I did not wish to see Mariuscha dispossessed in favour of him, for a more unprepossessing being surely did not exist. The lowness of his type impressed one at once—and his obvious devotion to the lady who had cut him out. Indeed, I found that he openly proclaimed it, and had eagerly accepted her invitation to spend his Easter holidays with her.

"If that isn't low, I wonder what is?" I asked

Margot later, when I got a word with her before dinner.

"I don't know; he may as well take what he can get. His people were glad enough to allow the boy to come here for his holidays, and then, of course, boy-like, calf-like, he went and fell in love with the monster who had cut him out. He's seventeen. Well, who knows? she is only twenty-five, and stranger things than that have happened!"

"I should earnestly hope he would die first. He looks as if he had water on the brain."

"You have never forgiven him that pinch, Carrie; what a revengeful little body you are! I have heard of it from Lisbon. He was talking of it only the other day. I say, don't you think Mr Philipson has a grand head?"

"Yes; save models for the Elders when you are married," said I, escaping.

She would talk of nothing but Mr Philipson, and I was just as selfish as she. I wanted to talk only of James, for whom my fainting love had somewhat strangely revived now that my rival was a young and beautiful woman. Was this disgraceful or no? There was nothing to disgust, though much to distress, in the sight of him constantly at the side of a Mariuscha.

There was nothing small about her, or the way she did things. She did not flirt; she simply took him over. The indecisions, the small amenities with which most women shield and cloak their predilections, were not for her. After dinner she

and he were the first to step over the sill of the French window of the dining-room on their blithe way to the wood; the fling of her lace scarf, as she cast it over her splendid shoulders, was a defiance to who sought to check her, an invitation to those who cared to imitate her frank indulgence of her will. Everybody did follow her—even George Grant, at a respectful distance, and without a partner. Mrs Coles and I were left sole tenants of the drawing-room. She "dreaded the night air," and wanted to talk to me—*i.e.*, to work off some burning scandals on my defenceless ears.

With some wretched white work on my knee, I sat near the open window, listening to the silvery sighing of the night wind in some aspens near the house, and picturing Mariuscha and James Lisbon in each other's arms, perhaps. Who knows? Mariuscha, with her well-known theories of the relations between the sexes, her fearless, frank indulgence of her whims, would think no harm; and now that the application of those theories touched me so closely, I detested them. I could not pretend that I was merely vicariously distressed in Lady Violet's interest, as I should have wished to—that would have been hypocrisy. Lady Violet was not "on" in this drama of three at all. I was the forsaken one, and James forsworn to me.

"Is it wise to sit so near the window?" Mrs Coles kept on saying.

"Wise—no; who said it was wise?" I repeated mechanically.

"Do you care about hearing the nightingale, really? I do think him a most over-rated bird, only useful for an excuse for lovers to get out and away from chaperons. Mariuscha is having a good time with Lisbon, isn't she?"

"But isn't he a married man, Mrs Coles?" said I, with a sad affectation of prudery.

"Oh, well, we all know what that marriage amounts to! He leaves his old woman of the sea conveniently at home, and goes away and has a good time among the girls, and small blame to him!"

"Lady Violet likes him to amuse himself," said I, stung to the defence of my late mistress. "She hates him to be tied to her sick-bed, and is—was, I mean—always egging him on to get some exercise—golf and fencing. . . ."

"This isn't golf—quite."

"It's out of doors, anyway. And now, if you don't mind, I will go to bed."

"Nobody ever goes to bed here; at least, I mean there is no hard and fast line. They say that Mariuscha often curls up on that sofa there and forgets to go to her own room at all. This is Liberty Hall, you know. People are flying about the passages all night. One needs a smart *peignoir*, I can tell you."

"Ah, well, I haven't such a thing, so I will get myself safely stowed, I think. Good night!"

I didn't go to my room after all; I felt far too restless and miserable. I went to Margot's, and waited for her to come up. I thought I could appreciate even Margot's conversation after Mrs Coles'. It would, at least, be chaster.

And I had come down a sort of accredited messenger from Michelle, to see if I could "save" Mariuscha from this? Ridiculous! I was neither here nor there; I believe I had imagined arrogantly that the sight of me in the house where our first meeting took place would unman my lover, that the intrusion of the old love would shake and unseat him in his pursuit of the new! I had nothing to do but go home again! They were both far too cynical to be affected by anything I could do or say; he seemed to accept my presence there, if anything, as an agreeable incident, and if it did worry him, he took good care that Mariuscha should not apprehend the fact.

Margot dashed in and seized my hands.

"Dear old Carrie! I do really think he's smitten to some purpose," she said. "Another good week will do it; and Mariuscha is such a brick that she'll not turn me out till I have done the trick. Then, just think! I'll have a picture on the line every year, and perhaps end as a Lady Academician—the first since Kauffman! It will have to come, and why should it not be me? Heigh ho! It is exhausting, though! Mariuscha goes it, doesn't she?"

"What a crew!" said I. I could not bear to talk any more of Mariuscha.

"Excepting my R.A., yes. That odious, good-looking James Lisbon flirting away for all he's worth, and drawing pay from home all the time! Lady Violet dresses him nicely, doesn't she? I saw his dressing-case, gold-mounted, the best that money can buy; and, oh, his dreams of waistcoats! I like the one he had on to-day, didn't you? He wears his clothes well. I should think his tailor loves him; it isn't every man who has a good figure can afford to pay, too! My man's get-up wants seeing to; he is, every ill-dressed inch of him, an artist."

"You can see to that, eventually."

"Suppose I shall have to if I am ever Mrs R.A." She yawned. "Do go, Carrie; I'm half asleep, and you look as if you hadn't slept for a month. How are your affairs going? Ferrars seemed very devoted, I thought, last time you were here."

"Oh, he proposed," I said carelessly, with a dreary enjoyment of Margot's certain surprise. "Good night!"

I had honestly tried to accept Dr Ferrars, but Colonel Lisbon had, as usual, stood in the way. I supposed he always would. How could I get him out of my life? I met him in the passage: I was not surprised. I felt I should, especially after what Mrs Coles had said. Under the light of the gas globe, his hair looked quite white. As usual, his eyes appealed; they appealed well, but I was

frozen into a mood that had lasted several years now. It was hardly worth while to change it.

Yet he said: "Darling!" and "Don't make a mistake. . . ." and was continuing earnestly, but I interrupted:

"I am not making a mistake—I am not making anything. I am determined not — I won't speak to you at all."

"Don't, then!" he said bitterly. "I have been talking to Mariuscha in her room."

Why he chose to leave me with that challenge I could not divine, until Mariuscha, opening the door of her boudoir as I passed, and beckoning me in, told me.

She never minced words. She stood in the midst of the ascetic Beam Room, in beautiful flowing draperies, and asked me point blank:

"Is that man yours, Carrie?"

"He was mine, and now he is Lady Violet's."

"Pooh! Lady Violet doesn't count"—she flipped her fingers sharply — "but you do . . . . Carrie . . . . I wonder what you are thinking of me?"

"I cannot think, Mariuscha, I am too miserable."

"I thought so. Poor girl! . . . Carrie, listen—he is going to-morrow. On my word. And now, tell me, did my sister Michelle set you on to watch me?"

"I shouldn't allow myself to be set on. No, I came here—on my own account, just to make myself suffer a little more, I suppose."

"What fools you women are!" said Mariuscha,

sinking into a chair. "Do sit down too, Carrie. You'd be shocked if I smoked, I suppose? But I will. I'm done. Can't sleep! I never go to bed, hardly. I say *you women*, for I grew out of all that long since, and laid aside all rotten womanish things. Look at me! I love a man called Livingston—and I hate him too, for he has insulted me, does insult me, every hour of the day. This other man, this beautiful bone of contention, I neither love nor hate. But he amused me, and interested me—it is all any of them can do for me now, since Casimlr went, and left the poor Lady of Shalott. Yes, I am cursed. But to return to our point. The moment I saw that Lisbon cared for you——"

"Cared for me?"

"Yes, adores you—hug the news, if it does you any good. For you, and no one else—like that. There are many ways of caring, of course. I evoke the baser sort. Yes, he cares for you, Carrie, just as I care for Casimir. It is against my interest to marry Casimir, do you see? just as it was not to Lisbon's interest to marry you, but Lady Violet instead. And being a sensible, consistent man, he pursued his policy, and married her, just as I consult my best interests, or what I think to be my best interests, by refusing to marry Casimir and give all this up." She waved her hand round the room. "Both Lisbon and I have realised that Love isn't everything——"

"Love is nothing," I said sadly.

"I might be wrong," she said softly; "I don't seem to get much happiness out of my theories myself. But do, dearest, take my advice and wait."

"For what?"

"Lady Violet's death, of course. It's the obvious move, is it not? And such as I am, I shall stand out of the way; I can't bear the idea of making any woman unhappy, least of all a pal. Besides, Carrie, if you will forgive me for saying so, I know you are so good, that your jealousy even is a kind of vicarious jealousy—you suffer not so much on your own account as on Lady Violet's——"

"Oh, Mariuscha, why should you sneer and spoil it all?"

"I am always sneering—you are always protesting, eh, Carrie? Well, however you may feel about it, I have done all I know to stop your being worried on either moral or personal grounds. I have persuaded—told—nay, ordered him to go from here, and he is going to have a telegram to-morrow, bidding him hie himself to the bedside of his only and lawful wife. And you will stay with me a little longer, won't you, dear, and see me through?"

"I can't really do anything for you, Mariuscha, dear, or you know I would."

"Can't you, though? I believe if you lived with me instead of The Coles, that the boycott would be taken off at once, and the whole neighbourhood come flocking to call."

"But why don't you send Coles away, anyhow?"

"You mean *you* won't come?"

"I can't."

"Well, then, I must take what I can get. You don't suppose I prefer the society of adventurers and West Kensington matrons? No, no. *Ach, du lieber Augustin, alles ist hin!* Now, child, you must go to bed. Say thank you prettily to poor Mariuscha. . . ."

She kissed me—a rare act with her—and talked "baby" talk. As I turned to go, she called me back:

"I say, he'll be off the first thing to-morrow morning, before you are up; you might go and say a kind word to him."

I stared. "In his room?"

"In his own room, or the smoking-room. I expect he is in the latter, waiting for you. I said something about sending you along."

She meant well. I answered sincerely:

"How kind of you; but I can't."

"Why not? Too proud, after the way he has treated you?"

"Not that, but——"

"You are afraid he would want to kiss you?"

"I am afraid *I* should want him to."

"Well, and if he did? Do you think he never kisses any one but Lady Violet?"

"I know he has kissed *you*, and I don't mind. But, tell me, would you let Casimir kiss you?"

"No, I should not," she said. "It would be too serious. It would imperil my resolve. I see what

you mean. It's sensible of you. No, don't go near your man—you love him too much, as I do Casimir."

"Mariuscha, is there no chance—none, of your ever being a happy, contented woman with that nice man?"

"No; never, now," she said, half closing the door on me. "As long as we both shall live. I am lost."

"You are?"

She nodded. "Good night! Sleep well!"

The door closed.

## CHAPTER XXIV

I WENT abroad after that for more than a year; Mich' found a most advantageous holiday engagement for me in Germany. I discovered afterwards that the advantages of it had been entirely procured by Mariuscha. Fraulein S—— had been amply subsidised to require very little work of me at a preposterous wage, and to make my stay in her house as agreeable as possible. German-like, she kept the secret well. My nerves thoroughly steadied and my health recuperated, I came back to Hans Place and became immersed in the care and interests of Michelle's family.

Of course, I had seen or heard nothing of "the girls" during my absence from England. It had been a rest-cure inasmuch as disquieting news; nay, all news from home seemed to have been sedulously kept from me. I sought Jehane at her club as soon as might be on my return, and asked her to put me up to date.

Jehane was her aggravated self—longer, lanker, more untidy than ever. I noticed, for the first time almost, what beautiful eyes she had. They were a little hollow. She sat over the fire in as

decorative, and to say decent, a manner as was consistent with comfort, and gave me the information I desired.

"Oh, well, Margot's married!—to her blessed old R.A. She is quite happy. He is very well off, and has resigned the R.A. himself, and he only lets 'my wife' go on with her art as a great favour and a nice amusement. She never exhibits. He insisted on having the old mother to live with them as long as she held on, and gave her the best room in the house. He adored her, it appears. Well, she was nearer his own age, anyway."

"Margot might have sent me some wedding cake," I said banteringly, though I really didn't care about it.

"Well, I don't know, there was always something inhuman about Margot. The main chance bulked so large with her, as we journalists say. Artists are like that, and so are authors, but journalists are not expected to have any temperament, it seems, any more than scene painters and poster-men, eh?"

"I don't know whether they are allowed to have it," I said. "They take it, anyhow."

"Don't be bitter, Carrie. You and I have never made our temperaments an excuse for anything, have we? What about Mariuscha? You know I wouldn't go to stay with her?"

"On moral grounds, eh?"

"Oh no. Not my sort, that's all. Margot battened on her and swallowed her dreadful set,

and made no bones about it, but I simply couldn't prostitute my mind to Mrs Coles and James Lisbon. Mariuscha seems to go on all right, if she can only smoke and laze about. Thirty or forty cigarettes a day she runs to; she'll kill herself. Does a lot of good in the neighbourhood, I hear. Regular Lady Bountiful! Conscience money, I suppose. But here I am gassing away about her, and you hear all the news from her sister, of course."

"Not much. They don't see much of each other. Michelle is grown very prim. But one thing I have heard which might alter things a little as far as *one* person is concerned."

"Livingston?"

"Yes. That boy — George Grant — you know——"

"Yes, the boy that pinched you. Go on."

"George Grant died—he was drowned, and old Canon Barling died, and his daughter—she was Mr Hardman's second cousin, you remember—married a man of considerable means—quite as rich as Mr Hardman, I believe, so there are the only two people who had any rights on Mr Hardman's property disposed of!"

"Hooray! Perhaps Casimir Livingston will relent, and let Mariuscha marry him, and prevent her poisoning herself with nicotine because people won't call on her. That's about it, isn't it? The smoke of despair!"

"It is possible they'll fix it up."

"People do say they have done that already."

"How do you mean?"

"Without benefit of clergy, you know. See each other once a month. I daresay it's all tommyrot and Marg*ot*!"

"What a pun! But, I say, how painfully they all *do* marry and settle down!"

"Don't they?" said Jehane sympathetically. I believe I could live with old Jehane, after all! "I was up at Desdemona's the other day; she and Perry are still turtle-doving! It is a very good thing he didn't have me, for I should never have been equal to it. I think I see myself warming a man's slippers and sewing on his shirt buttons for him—I, who can never get my own to stick on!"

"No; you are a woman of many pins, and unacquainted with the saving grace of buttons. But you get along all right." I was in a tolerant mood towards untidiness just then.

"So—so!" replied Jehane, poking the fire with the toe of her shoe till it blazed again. "It seems to me that my husbands are papers, as you used to say, and my children articles. I beat Desdemona at it, for I produce one a month, and I pocket the fee myself, instead of a fool of a doctor."

"But you never spend it—at least, not on yourself. A pair of new shoes, now, would be distinctly advantageous."

"Oh, I slouch along. The porter's baby who

is carried all day, has got the smartest pair in the world that I gave him."

"You old idiot!"

"Maybe." She hummed an air. "I am like the Miller of Dee. I care for nobody, and nobody cares for me. Except you, Carrie. We are both rather drowned rats of the world. Let's 'pal up' together. There's the room that Desdemona had, still at your service in the flat—I keep dress boxes in it now, and apples. I go to bed on an apple like other great men before me. Do come; you know I like you."

"And I like you, dear thing, but I seem to have grown so fidgety and cross of late—I dont't know what has come to me. Still, I am perfectly sure of this, that if you and I commit the frightful error of putting—what shall I say?—all our eggs into the same basket, we should be by the ears in a week. I am half Scotch, as you know."

"And whole particular," murmured Jehane.

"Yes; I will tell you the dreadful truth, Jehane, it is a Scotch trait of the Scotchiest—I should want clean sheets on my bed once a week. Lady Violet used to have to give them to me——"

"I know; she pampered your body, and starved your soul," said Jehane. "Don't try to kid me: I know very well that you are only inventing all these prohibitory rules to choke me off. 'Twas a handsome offer, own! But you have reasons, other ones, for not wanting to mess with me. It would be messing, I admit. I can never alter

myself, so I expect I shall be a lonely bird for the rest of my days. Oh, I don't complain, Jehane doesn't complain. *La garde meurt, mais ne se rend pas*—what did Cambronne say? At present I am fairly all right, but I tell you, Carrie, when it comes to this, that the rotten little men in offices one lives by, because they happen to control the output of the press; when the rotten cotton editors won't take my stuff but shake their heads and hint—just hint, mind you!—that it is a leetle out of date, and that the time has come when I may fairly rest on my laurels, or beam-ends, and that sort of mock-turtly consoling rubbish, I shall just bow politely, and leave their place smiling, and go to the nearest chemist and buy an ounce of morphia. Then home, and, having composed my skirtikins neatly — for the first and only time in my life—round my ankles, and having seen that there are some fresh flowers in the room, I shall inject the deadly substance, and be found by the cheap char' in the morning—dead—quite dead Oh!"

Deeply affected by the moving picture of Jehane dead, and slangy even in death, I exclaimed:

"Darling old Jehane! the very first time an editor cuts up rough you are to send me a wire, before paying any silly visit to chemists and gratifying your melodramatic instincts, and making a 'par'—you wouldn't get more than eight lines—and I'll come to live with you, bag and baggage, and sleep in the blankets, if you like, or provide

sheets myself, eh? But, meantime, say the cap of journalism still sits lightly on your brow, and I am Mrs Langshire's nursery governess *en titre*, and I am making the hideous discovery that I rather like children——"

I made this ghastly admission in fear and trembling, not knowing what capital of mirth and derision Jehane might make of it. But, oddly enough, she took me seriously, even wistfully.

"Aren't you rather showing the cloven foot of the maternal instinct they talk so much about? You were bound to have it lurking somewhere in the recesses of your being. Don't look so ashamed of it, my dear; it is no particular disgrace to be a woman, after all. I sometimes think that we of the Sex were meant to meekly follow the great Convention, and have our babies—a sufficiency of them — decently and in order. One never gets very far from it, anyway. The desire to mother something or somebody is bred in the bone. Why, I, myself—I have started a cat in the flat now, unbeknown to the landlord—something curly and purry to come and welcome me when I get in at nights; it's a bit of company. Since even Louy married—at her size!—I got too lonely for words. The milkman's yaup in the mornings used to make me leap out of bed in a panic. Old maid's nerves, that's all. But Mistigris will be having a set of kittens next, and I shall be found hanging over the cot full of the base-born things, attending to them and slobbering over them, just

like Perry and Desdemona. I say, Carrie, isn't it quite funny to go up there, and gloat on the baby that ought by rights to be half mine. Makes me look about for the hanky that *isn't* sticking in my waistband, so I have to swallow 'em. And instead of being half mine, it is all Desdemona's, and yet I am so poor-spirited that I don't hate her one little bit."

"I should have said large-hearted," I interposed.

"I take it out in giving her hints as to scientific training of babies. She doesn't know in the very least how to manage hers. Fancy! She——"

"Old maid's children!" I interrupted. "Jehane, dear, allow me to prevent your becoming maudlin. Let me tell you what I came to tell you. We are all going to Swanbergh for the summer, and do you happen to know—I believe you had an aunt there—if there is a decent beach for my babies?"

"Ho, ho!" laughed Jehane. "*My* babies! Who's maudlin now? I think I see you, Caroline Courtenay, taking out the brats early in the morning, piloting them down to the beach in the cliff tramway, with their pails and their spades knocking against your legs, and you answering their idiotic questions while all the rest of the passengers grin beatifically. Then you sit down patiently, and produce a basket made of twine with 'A Present from Swanbergh' on it, and you wedge their little persons and all their clothes into india-rubber waders till they look like specimens in the Natural History Museum of some new

beetle or microbe, and send them into the sea to plodge. Then you will sigh and produce a delightful novel of Miss Marie Corelli's, but not for long will you enjoy it. There'll be sounds of infant woe, and you'll rush in after Bobby or Billy *in extremis* lying on his stomach in the surf, and you'll be soaked through getting him out, and the grateful infant will kick you black and blue. It is a bit of a drop, isn't it, Carrie, for a clever, educated girl like you?"

"A drop from being a cross, vulgar, old woman's *souffre douleur*, to have the sole charge of two nice, fat, natural little children, and be a sort of second mother to them, and watch their little minds unfold——"

"Allow me, Carrie, to prevent your becoming maudlin, dear. Oh, I say, we are a pair of us, we are!" She looked at the club clock. "I say, I'm due at home to work up an article. Good-bye, old girl; go back to your babies, and I'll go back to my cat. We are only silly, normal women, when all is said and done!"

## CHAPTER XXV

To Swanbergh we went, and, as Jehane predicted, I did sit for hours on the beach with the conventional bit of sewing in my fingers and the buns and Albert biscuits in the paper bag beside me, under the nurse-like check umbrella, a sort of anchorage for the two happy little mortals that played round me at a safe calculated distance, whence I could run at once to retrieve them, should any of the minute troubles incident to childhood befall the sweet, stolid children of Herbert Langshire.

Michelle generally came down to the beach with us for her bathe and her swimming lesson, and would join us later on and sit in the sun to let her hair dry. She was kind and conventional. Her sister had made her so; Mariuscha's conduct had pushed her into the conventions Mariuscha despised. She was not exactly a hard mistress, but she kept my nose to the grindstone, inasmuch as she insisted on her children's usurping the whole field of my thought, and the monopolising of all my waking hours in their service was making rather an idiot of me. She looked with some

disfavour on any *rapprochement* between me and my old friends; she thought them rough and common (so they were), and she did not want my attention in any way distracted from her immediate circle, and its affairs. I did not care; I saw my dear old Jehane now and then, and that was all I cared for; I had never had many men friends, and I had none at all now.

The children were very exacting in their unconscious way. In the course of the morning, somebody's shoe-lace was sure to come undone a few dozen times, or somebody's hat elastic snap, or somebody else's sash cry aloud for the useful and fallible pin. I liked it. The sight of the yellow sand pouring through the gap between the big toe and the next one was sweetly familiar to me, the gold locks turning up at the ends and reddening and coarsening under the fierce heat of the sunlight rejoiced my eyes, the clash of the little useless pails was music in my ears. I was happy—there is no other word for it, happy without strain or violence, but with a full consciousness that this quiet form of what the whole world pursues so anxiously was more—far more than I had the right to expect, and best for me, out of all good gifts that I might foolishly have hankered after. It was Peace. Peace!

And yet these little gods in the machine to me were another woman's children!

It was always at the back of my mind that I must not make them too fond of me, that I

must not let the trailing, clinging tendrils of my heart, aspiring after affection, fasten round them till it was agony to be torn off, and cast away from them, as I inevitably should be. Sometimes, however, I sensibly made a compact with myself, and agreed to let my love faculty take its course, and waste its all on these heaven-sent objects of devotion, at the cost of bearing the pain that must ensue, when the divergences of life, and the claims of those nearer in blood, deprived me of my solace. Yes, I made up my mind to love while, and what, I could. My youth was going—had gone—well, Nature takes no heed of waste, nor counts her failures or sighs after the ungarnered ears that fall out of the waggon.

One day as I sat huddled up on the beach, quite alone, for the moment, for the children had run to the part of the shore whence they could observe their mother taking her first swimming lesson, I saw Colonel Lisbon come out of the porch of the Beach Hotel, just behind me, and walk deliberately in my direction. He had the walk of an older man. I sat quite still on the hammock of sand the children had made for me with their little spades, and waited for him to reach the place where I was. He had spied me from one of the hotel windows, doubtless. As soon as he attained me he flung himself down on the sand at my side, and pulled his cap over his eyes. The sun was unmercifully strong just then.

I noticed a wide band of crape on his arm, and I knew as well as if he had spoken what he had come to tell me. But he did not speak. I supposed he was embarrassed, and intended me to be the one to break the awkward silence. I did not refuse to help him. Fixing my eyes, which had suddenly misted over, on the door of the bathing machine whence Mrs Langshire was shortly to issue, I asked him a question, to start him—a mean, obvious one:

"How did you know where to find me?"

"Find you, Carrie? Believe me, dear, I have never once lost sight of you. I have kept an accurate count of your movements ever since that dreary day you left Dampier Square. Carrie!" —here his voice leapt up—"Carrie, my darling, I am a free man!"

I was letting two or three pebbles run softly, backwards and forwards, through my palms. They were hot through and through with the power of the sun, and nearly burned my hands. I always like a little counter irritant in the form of mild pain to help me to make up my mind and stimulate my judgment. The expression James used was tactless, to begin with. To hear a man boasting of his present freedom who had himself in the first instance put the shackles round his neck! Unconvincing! In fact, my old lover now stood arraigned before my bar, a moral criminal, and my critical faculty had been sharpened and set on edge by five years of introspection and

anguish. He would have justice, but scant justice, untempered by mercy. If he had wanted mercy, he should have avoided giving into my hand the weapon of his flirtation with Mariuscha, and he should have come before me five—two years earlier at least, when I still loved him, or thought I did. Woe to the man who builds up that awful cairn of hardness in a once loving, glamour-blinded woman! For then she will sacrifice reason and truth to her chosen attitude, or pose, if you will, and recklessly stake her own happiness as well as his on the altar of her pride.

He was talking away, and I was stiffening, instinct with the self-willed rigidity that I would use to fight us both with.

"And, Carrie, I have come straight off to ask you to marry me—now—next week—as soon, in fact, as you think it would be decent. My late wife——"

I dropped the last pebble and turned to him. "I shall never think it decent. Never. You should have thought of it before. Men can't do these things and then consider the case unchanged. When you threw me over, five years ago"—he protested faintly, but I went on—"threw me over to marry another woman——"

"Carrie, Carrie, mind your words. They are hardly applicable. You mean to say that I threw you over to *nurse* another woman. For I have nursed her, faithfully. I can honestly say so——"

"Yes, you can truly say so," I said with a shiver

of disgust. There it was, my best weapon! The horror of certain situations that had never died out!

"I kept her alive for three years over the time allotted to her by the doctors. It was a pure miracle, her surviving. I suppose, Carrie, in your thoughts of me, you fancied I was more likely to try my best to hasten her death than defer it, like some conventional villain of melodrama—put arsenic or antimony in her gruel or her tea! Carrie, you surely knew me better than that! You knew very well that I should do my best when once I had put my shoulder to the wheel. You are silent? Then you *did* suspect me of unnameable baseness——"

"I suspected you of nothing but the initial baseness of——"

"Oh, for God's sake, say it! Don't spare me, or mince your words. You never did. That's why I loved you—love you. You suspected me of marrying an old, repulsive——"

"Don't!"

"An old woman for the sake of her money, and throwing over the girl I really did love to enable me to do so, without any redeeming ulterior object. But I *had* an object. You! Yes, poor Violet was my Leah, and I served my time faithfully for her. Laban, my task-master, was simply the stress of life that obliged me to obtain a competence to keep *you* on. This way, albeit an unpleasant one, lay ready to my hand. I took it. My Rachel, give me your hand and admit I

am, at least, no worse than Jacob, who loved Rachel so truly that he sold himself into slavery to gain her. There's Scripture authority for me! And luck! I got off with five years only. And now the Rachel I worked for turns her face away from me."

I hated being spoken of theatrically in the third person. "You have just found Leah and Rachel," I said. "They sound well now, but I am sure you never thought of them when you—began your campaign. Tell me—I should like to know, if it is only out of curiosity—what *rôle* did you mean me to play, when you first had the idea of marrying Lady Violet?"

"To tell you the exact truth, it was in my mind that she wouldn't live," he replied sulkily—I think he always hated telling the truth. "And I didn't mean—at first—to do what I did—that is, keep her alive beyond the stipulated time. But that, of course, was while I was still in doubt as to how you would take it—whether you would cotton or not to my plan."

"How did you expect me to take it?"

"Well, Carrie, we were neither of us very young, very passionately inclined people. I thought you liked me well enough, but then you had been so quiet and sensible—shall I say?—all along, that I didn't suppose you would care about a lot of love-making. I thought you and I were just the sort of people who could have got along very well in the same house together, and managed with a kiss

now and then, till we could marry comfortably. It wasn't that I didn't adore you, mind, but I am a man who has himself well in hand, and I saw no reason why I should compromise you. I—on my honour, I did not intend——"

"I am very much obliged to you for intending to spare me! What a perfectly awful, cold-blooded plan! I am not sure even that I quite believe in it. Men are such—— Yes, dear, I'll tie it up." This was to the little girl, who had wandered up to us with a yard of tape trailing after her and a piteous appeal to be tied again. Cheerfully she raced back to her play, and I continued my conversation with James. "Didn't you know me well enough to realise that I wouldn't have had anything to do with a low scheme of that kind? Not for a moment would I have agreed! But no, you never did know me, did you?"

"As you will. I don't pretend to know women, I am a plain man. But when I found you were going to be stiff-necked and disagreeable about it, it filled me with despair. I was angry with you, but I wanted you more than ever. Your disdainful airs stimulated me. You worked your contempt for all it was worth. You wouldn't look at me. I positively got to know the lines of your profile by heart, I forgot your full face . . . your little wilful, full face! How hard you must have worked at not turning it in my direction! You never spoke to me except when you could not absolutely help it. We were a wretched household, weren't we? Poor old Violet, too——"

"Oh, hush! I suffered also."

"Oh, I know you did. You got as thin as a lath, and almost plain. I longed to have the doctoring of you instead of—— You desperately needed taking care of. I got frights about you. I sometimes came up and stood by your door for half an hour in the middle of the night, listening for your breathing. I suspected Heart? You see, I had been reading medical books till I got nervous. I was afraid of losing my poor Carrie. Darling, if I had knocked, very gently, would you have got up and spoke to me—perhaps let me in——"

"Of course not, James."

"Of course not!" He mimicked me sadly. Yet he was never nearer—that is, if he was ever near at all—to getting me than at that moment. "Didn't I tell you? One knows what you will say beforehand. Bless you, I soon found out what a moral tartar I had caught, a frosty little soul, a woman I loved, but who was too prim to love me."

"I did love you, James. But the idea of you selling yourself for money! We could have starved together—worked——"

"Neither," said he. "I didn't want to work, and I didn't want you to starve. So I thought myself very clever when I hammered out a way."

"—Of degrading yourself in my eyes, hopelessly. James, those nights you spoke of—I am sure that you never waited a full hour, half an hour, nay, not five minutes, or else you would have known that

I was not asleep. You would have heard me crying. I was very seldom asleep, but generally wide awake, listening, horribly fascinated, to sounds that I would have given anything not to have heard. I used to hear you—or think I heard you . . . it was awful . . . yes, I am sure it was that that killed all the love I once felt for you . . . slowly. Why didn't you get somebody——?"

"Bravado."

"It was a small thing, of course, but it was so ugly, so squalid, so unworthy of the man I——"

"I know," he answered. "Well, you see, dear, it was this way: I got embittered. I said, If the woman I love won't look at me, won't listen to me, won't let me give her a good time, then at least The Other shall profit by it; she shall have my care, she shall not be able to complain that she wasn't properly looked after. And she was looked after, jolly well, I can tell you. Poor old soul, she was grateful enough, anyhow, and realised that I was paying dear for my fortune. I think she came to twig it at the last; still, I can swear that I never relaxed, never stinted her wishes in any one particular. But it was pretty stiff! Five precious years of a man's life spent in carrying out the avocations of a hired nurse! By Jove, Carrie, I worked at my loveless marriage as if it had been one of the most interesting of the professions. Honestly, if it had not been for my intense conviction that what I was doing was justifiable, I could hardly have carried it through. My very

gorge rose sometimes at the horrid tasks, the indignities it entailed. We won't speak of them—I see you shudder—but I must tell you that many a time I felt the sensation of being actually degraded—something like what a woman disguised as a valet might feel. I was a valet, disguised as a husband."

"Oh, don't!"

"I shock you, Carrie, I suppose? Well, I don't wonder, I shocked myself. And against all sense and reason, I got to long to keep her alive, out of a sort of misapplied professional pride, it fed my vanity; and also I was aware, somehow, that her death would practically avail me nothing—the money I was to get would only bore me, now you were changed to me. I had intended to be her chief legatee, of course, I had laid myself out for it; but would you believe me, Carrie, I positively dreaded the moment when it would all come to me! The cold, tall house—freehold, that I now live in—where you were to come and live with me—only I had a sort of feeling all along that you wouldn't. So to defer her death was to defer the moment when I should touch her awful money——"

"But you handled it, all the time."

"That's ungenerous—but no matter. You can hardly hurt me, now. You have broken me, dear. . . . Ah, what a winter that last one we passed together was! And a particularly foggy one, I remember. And then, to crown all, you took

some sort of ridiculous notion into your head, and came and gave up your place—like a servant—in my study—theatrically, as if to rub it in the better. I got you there, however—I made you stop your month—my last hope."

"Yes, I remember I said that I had rather forfeit the money——"

"At that moment I simply hated you, Carrie. Money—between us!"

"I wanted so desperately to go. The strain—I could not bear it any longer."

"You mean you didn't choose. You can bear anything as long as you wish. You have the pluck of the devil. Indomitable little thing! That is what has made me love you, and only you and no other woman in my whole life, so that I have worn myself out in your service——"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I am 'done.' I am old. I have got the beastly money, it is true, but I should like to chuck it out of the window. Who wants it—who wants me? I am grey, nearly white—I stoop—I have grown old in waiting for a thankless woman, and working for a pittance to keep her on."

He maddened me so that I flung out at him. "So you call that work? And you tell me that you have never loved any other woman but me! What about Mariuscha?"

"Mariuscha Lancaster? My co-fortune-hunter. The brain of a man and the heart of a woman!

Oh yes, I made love to the Russian girl in my despair. We were pretty well in the same boat. Yes, she was kind to me, and then she sent me back to you."

"Oh, that's too much! Go back to her. Get her to marry you. Put your two ill-gotten fortunes together."

"Pool our wealth, eh? Yes, she is sensible enough, but she happens to have made other plans. Are not you aware that your old friend has taken her life in her own hands and arranged it boldly and simply, according to the dictates of her reason and her inclinations? I may say with regard to its limitations, its possibilities. But, then, Mariuscha is an exceptional woman!"

"And I am an ordinary, every-day one, thank God. I understand you. I don't even consider myself insulted. It is Mariuscha you insult by your insinuations. But about our own case—yes, I do feel as an ordinary woman would feel under the circumstances, I cannot forgive certain things. You will say that I am narrow. Say so, say so! I glory in it! Perhaps I am benighted, don't even see clear? But then I'm not exceptional. I don't know whether I even love you now or not; I am sure, I hope not. Anyway, it is settled that I am not clever or subtle enough to explain or argue about my emotions, or to strike out a strong line for myself. But some of the things you have done, I simply can't stand, even if it was right to do them from your own point of view. I just

can't get over them. And all that pretty Bible story you have been telling me and its application—it only shocks me and doesn't help you a bit. Forget poor Leah! Be your soft, obedient Rachel! Never! Never! To live in that house with you would stifle me, the walls would lean down and tell me things. You live there, you say: I should have to go there with you. One thing, I could walk up the steps by myself! But I could not bear to go through that doorway where you stooped and kissed me behind her back one day—a charming bit of *espièglerie* you thought it—or to see you sitting in the swivel chair that you sat in one other time, and paid me my wages out of *her* money for *not* looking after her—it was my retaining fee, I suppose? And the room upstairs——"

"We won't speak of that, if you don't mind," said he, white as ashes. "I see that your heart is definitely set against me. Yet all that I did, I repeat, was done for you; I overdid it, I suppose—I have disgusted you. I thought you were a stronger woman? Good-bye."

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